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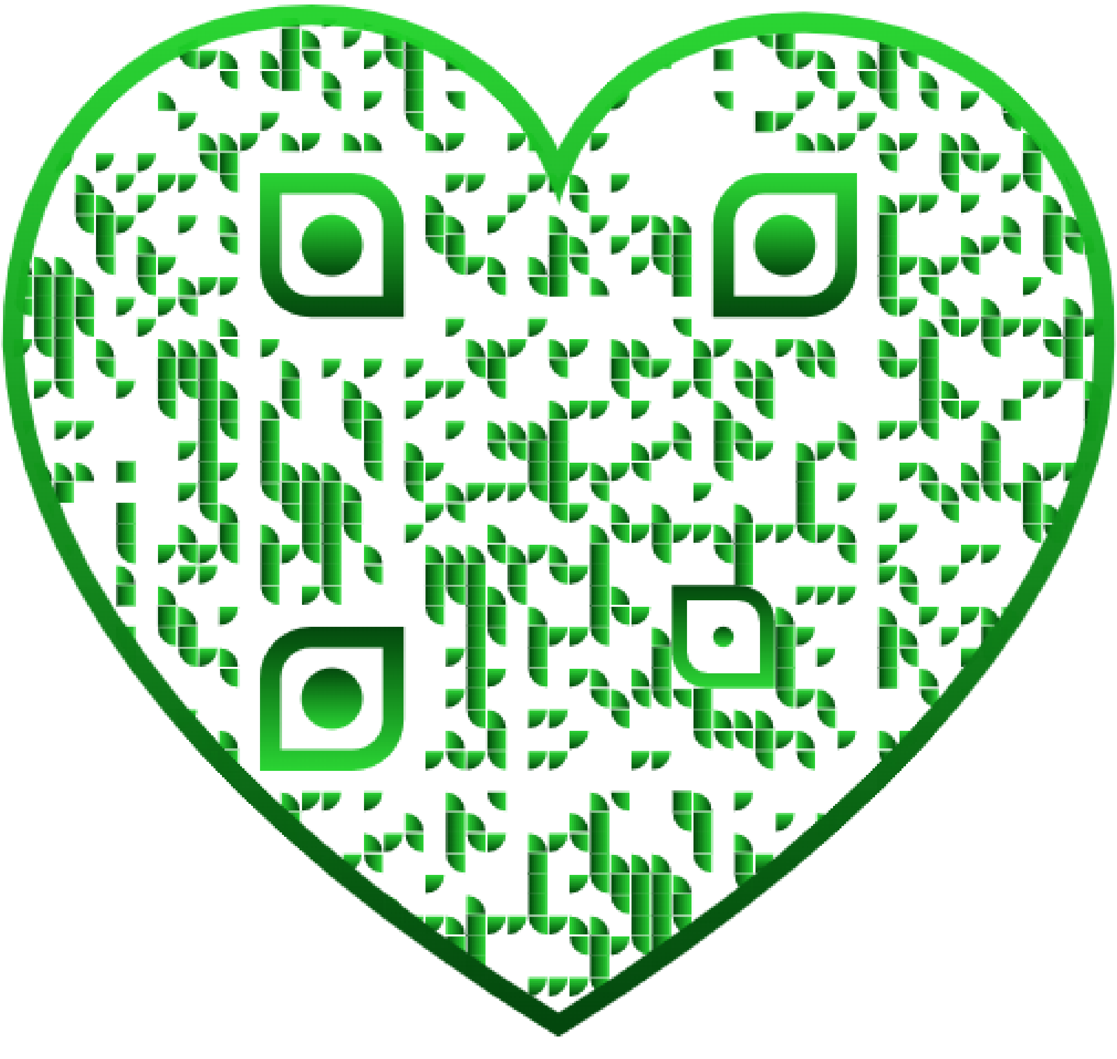

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Still amazing after all these years: the Lotus Esprit at 50

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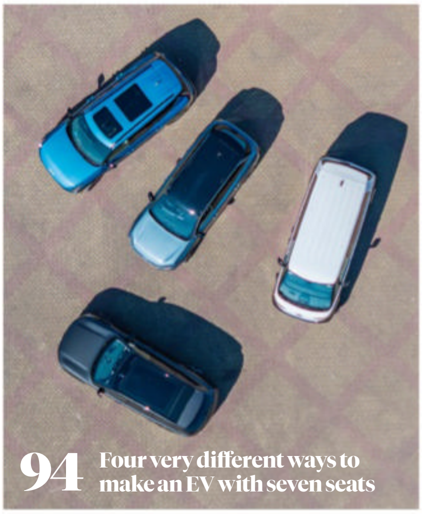

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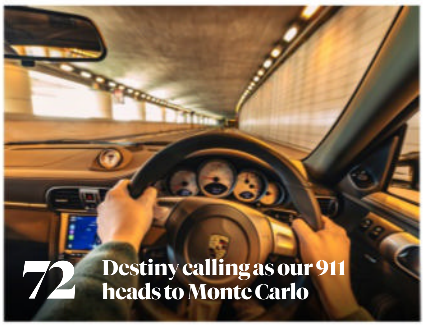

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Agenda

The hard line over F1 and World Rally stars swearing in public has induced a degree of ridicule

MOTORSPORT

F1's booming. But the feuding FIA could wreck that

Damien Smith Motorsport journalist

▶ **Fears are growing that the** world of motorsport is on the brink of new turmoil as exasperation continues to escalate over the state of its governance under the FIA and its controversial president Mohammed Ben Sulayem.

Disagreement between the FIA and motor racing's key powerbrokers hasn't exactly been uncommon since that arch autocrat Jean-Marie Balestre and a competitor faction led by Bernie Ecclestone went to war over the control of Formula 1 way back in 1981-'82. But the current level of unrest hasn't been seen since the last days of Max Mosley's rule, which ended when he chose not to stand for re-election in 2009 in the wake of a tabloid exposé involving colourful aspects of his private life. After the relative serenity of Jean Todt's tenure as FIA president between 2009 and '21, it looks as though the FIA has returned to the bad old days, as Ben Sulayem serves the final year of his first term in office.

A string of troubling stories and episodes have peppered Emirati Ben Sulayem's rule since he beat British barrister Graham Stoker in the last presidential election in December 2021. Historic comments regarding his views on women, a high-handed approach in F1 matters and an exodus of senior staff have made this a chequered time within the Paris-based governing body.

Recent changes in the FIA statutes reducing accountability and a clampdown on the behaviour of racing drivers have further undermined confidence. The hard line over F1 and World Rally stars swearing in public has induced a degree of ridicule, with drivers in both codes expressing their frustration at the ruling. Then after the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, Max Verstappen – who had previously served the equivalent of motorsport community service for swearing in a press conference – refused to comment on his obvious annoyance over an in-race penalty.

What he did say suggested he was concerned at the potential consequences of expressing his view. 'You can't share your opinion because it's not appreciated apparently, or people can't handle the full truth,' he said. 'Honestly, it's better if I don't say too much.'

The level of exasperation has been best expressed by Prodrive founder David Richards, in his capacity as chairman of British governing body Motor Sport UK. Richards went public via an incendiary open letter to MSUK members in March, after he was one of a number of FIA members barred from a World Council meeting in February when he refused to sign a new non-disclosure agreement.

Richards wrote about an 'erosion of accountability and good governance within the FIA', despite having backed Ben Sulayem over Stoker during the 2021 election. In his letter, the 72-year-old pointed out three key promises the president had made: to take a 'hands-off', non-executive approach to the role; to appoint an 'empowered and capable' CEO to run the FIA to professional standards; and for 'full transparency of actions and the highest standards of sporting governance'.

Richards wrote: 'I'm afraid that over the last three years there has been a distinct failure to meet these promises. In fact, the situation has progressively worsened, with media reports confirming that numerous senior members of the FIA and volunteer officials have either been fired or have resigned under an opaque cloud.'

The new confidentiality agreement, beyond one all World Council members had previously signed, was the 'final straw'. Richards labelled it a 'gagging order'.

The FIA responded more than a month later, in a letter sent by general manager Alberto Villarreal. 'We struggle to understand your reluctance to be bound by the same terms and conditions as your fellow members, given you acknowledge the damage the numerous leaks from the World Motor Sport Council have made to the FIA's mission,' he wrote. 'Under the leadership of its president, the FIA is delivering a lasting and positive legacy in support of the Federation's global mission.'

A few days later another senior official and previous key ally to the president resigned from his position. Robert Reid, former co-driver to the late WRC champion Richard Burns, served as Ben Sulayem's deputy president for sport, but stepped down citing 'a fundamental breakdown in governance standards' within the FIA.

Reid too had refused to sign the new confidentiality ▶

Richards (below) has criticised the FIA's Mohammed Ben Sulayem (left, with Red Bull's Christian Horner)

Balestre and Mosley: the old school

Sutton Images/Getty

agreement and had been barred from the same World Council meeting. He expressed a 'growing alarm' over critical decisions being made without due process or proper consultation.

He added: 'When I took on this role, it was to serve the FIA's members, not to serve power. Over time, I have witnessed a steady erosion of the principles we promised to uphold. Decisions are being made behind closed doors.'

The FIA has since put forward another leading rally figure, M Sport chief Malcolm Wilson, as Reid's surprise replacement.

Even his critics accept that under Ben Sulayem progress in key areas has been made – progress that's been overshadowed by the current turmoil. A focus on the role of women in motorsport and strategies to encourage a wider diversity of participation from racing's grassroots are among the FIA's recent success stories. Also, as Villarreal pointed out, 'the FIA has made remarkable strides improving the financial performance… to ensure the long-term sustainability of motorsport and mobility. The financial turnaround is evident, with a projected €2.2 million improvement in 2024 compared to the €24 million deficit that the President inherited in 2021.'

Will Ben Sulayem face a serious challenge when FIA members cast their votes again in December? It is understood that efforts to put forward a single opposing candidate are galvanising, with at least three figures willing to put their hat in the ring, including Carlos Sainz Senior.

A focus on the role of women in motorsport is among the FIA's overshadowed success stories

Whoever steps up, it won't be Richards. Even if he had aspirations to be president, which he has always denied, he's ruled out by a change made to the FIA statutes last year which stops anyone over 70 putting themselves forward for the role. It is said the change was nicknamed as 'David's rule' by FIA insiders.

However strong a candidate is put up, there are no guarantees he or she would defeat Ben Sulayem. If the president wins a second term, critics fear a parallel to President Trump's so-far 'eventful' return to power in the United States. For example, Ben Sulayem has made it clear he favours a return to naturally-aspirated V10 engines for F1 beyond the next generation of hybrid powertrains set for introduction next year. That is likely to put the FIA on a collision course with Liberty Media-run F1.

Key stakeholders in F1 have been careful to avoid direct conflict with the president, who like Trump appears brittle to public criticism, to avoid rocking the boat in what has been a time of healthy growth for the sport. But if Ben Sulayem believes he has full control over F1's future direction, a return to the stormy days of Balestre could well be on the horizon.

NEW CARS

Nothing is as it seems

Jake Groves News editor

Not an Audi

▶ **But an AUDI instead.** Thought Audi had stopped giving its cars confusing names? Turns out we hadn't seen anything yet, because here's Audi's new sub-brand with the same name… but in capital letters. This is the E5 Sportback, AUDI's first car, which will be sold only in China. Power outputs vary from a modest 295bhp up to 776bhp, with a claim of up to 478 miles on a charge (albeit on China's own CLTC test cycle). Four-wheel steering, air suspension and lidar for sophisticated assistance tech are all included, as are camera mirrors and a central display that spans the full width of the dash.

Not an SUV

▶ **Despite Lexus obsessing over SUVs,** the new ES is a proper classic saloon, of a type currently popular in China – hence the Shanghai show debut – but it's a global car, with both hybrid and EV powertrains. 'Our approach will be where some cars are specific to the Chinese market… to India… to the US… some for us,' says Lexus Europe boss Pascal Ruch. 'While Europe might not be the driver in the development of the ES, we can still offer it.' The new ES is bigger than before and comes complete with a dramatic front end (even by Lexus standards) and comes with a super-clean interior. It'll be here next year.

Not an Evoque

▶ **But a lot like one** when viewed from far away. This is the Jaecoo 5, the next car from one of many Chinese brands growing swiftly in the UK and Europe. It's smaller than its Range Rover Evoque-alike styling may suggest, instead being designed to take on all sorts of rivals from around the world, including the likes of the Ford Puma Gen-E, Kia EV3 and even the new Suzuki eVitara. It's an EV with a range Jaecoo says will be around 250 miles and comes with loads of kit, including a cockpit that looks a lot like that of a Ford Explorer. Who said China's copycat days were over?

Not a Volkswagen

▶ **No, wait, sorry –** this *is* a Volkswagen, it just barely looks like one. Named ID. Evo, it's one of three concepts jointly developed by VW with three Chinese car brands. The Evo is an EV and is focused on the younger, fashion-forward folks who are endlessly on their phones and is equipped with 800-volt electronics for faster charging speeds. The other two, Aura and Era, put their focus on AI and living space respectively. Not looking like a VW is kind of the point; design director Andreas Mindt aims to shake things up in an effort to make the brand popular again in the world's biggest car market.

9 1 1 REIMAGINED – AGAIN

Is your old 911 knackered? Are you loaded? Here's an idea

Ben Miller Editor

Take as long as you need

Timeless design meets an obsessive attention to detail

▶ **The greatest 911? Tough call.** But until today the answer was invariably the S/T, the 60th anniversary special 911 Porsche created blending GT3 underpinnings with a cleaner, vaguely retro aesthetic. Unobtainable new and ferociously expensive now, the S/T is a beautiful little thug of a road racer. It's also about as light as modern 911s get and uses a turbo-free 4.0-litre flat-six. Perfect, then, if a little big and digital in the modern style.

Singer's latest restoration service, the 911 Carrera Coupe reimagined by Singer Vehicle Design, looks set to change things – and give most of us a new answer to the ultimate 911 question. Pitched somewhere between the modern 911 GT3 and GTS in remit, it too fuses a high-performance, analogue character with timeless 911 curves. It also uses a 4.0-litre flat-six with a six-speed manual 'box and ceramic brakes. And it too would be as mesmerising carving canyons as lapping Laguna. Only, being a restored 964, the Carrera Coupe service by Singer is both smaller and lighter than a 911 S/T, while offering scope for personalisation far beyond anything Porsche can manage. Sadly, however, Singer's services are even more expensive. Every Singer commission is different, of course, but a Carrera Coupe restoration will likely require a spare $1.5m/£1.12m, plus the donor 964 and taxes.

Singer Vehicle Design exploded into the gearhead consciousness some 15 years ago with a restoration service retrospectively dubbed the Classic; essentially a type-964 911 pulled apart and rebuilt with a level of love, care and funding that allows for the very best of everything.

In recent years, powered by the passion of main men Rob Dickinson (founder, executive chairman and creative director) and Maz Fawaz (chief strategy officer, with ex-Ford man Raj Nair now as CEO), Singer has gone supernova, upscaling its production facility (from boutique Californian hot rod shop to vast modern facility with its own paint shop), establishing an ambitious engineering facility in the UK's F1 belt and pulling together a dazzling collection of top-tier partners, including Williams, Brembo, Bosch and Red Bull Advanced Technologies. Restlessly innovative, it took the flat-six engine to another level ▶

with the DLS (all now complete and delivered) and DLS Turbo services, and introduced the '70s 911 Turbo-inspired Classic Turbo as its main restoration offering, replacing the now closed-for-orders Classic.

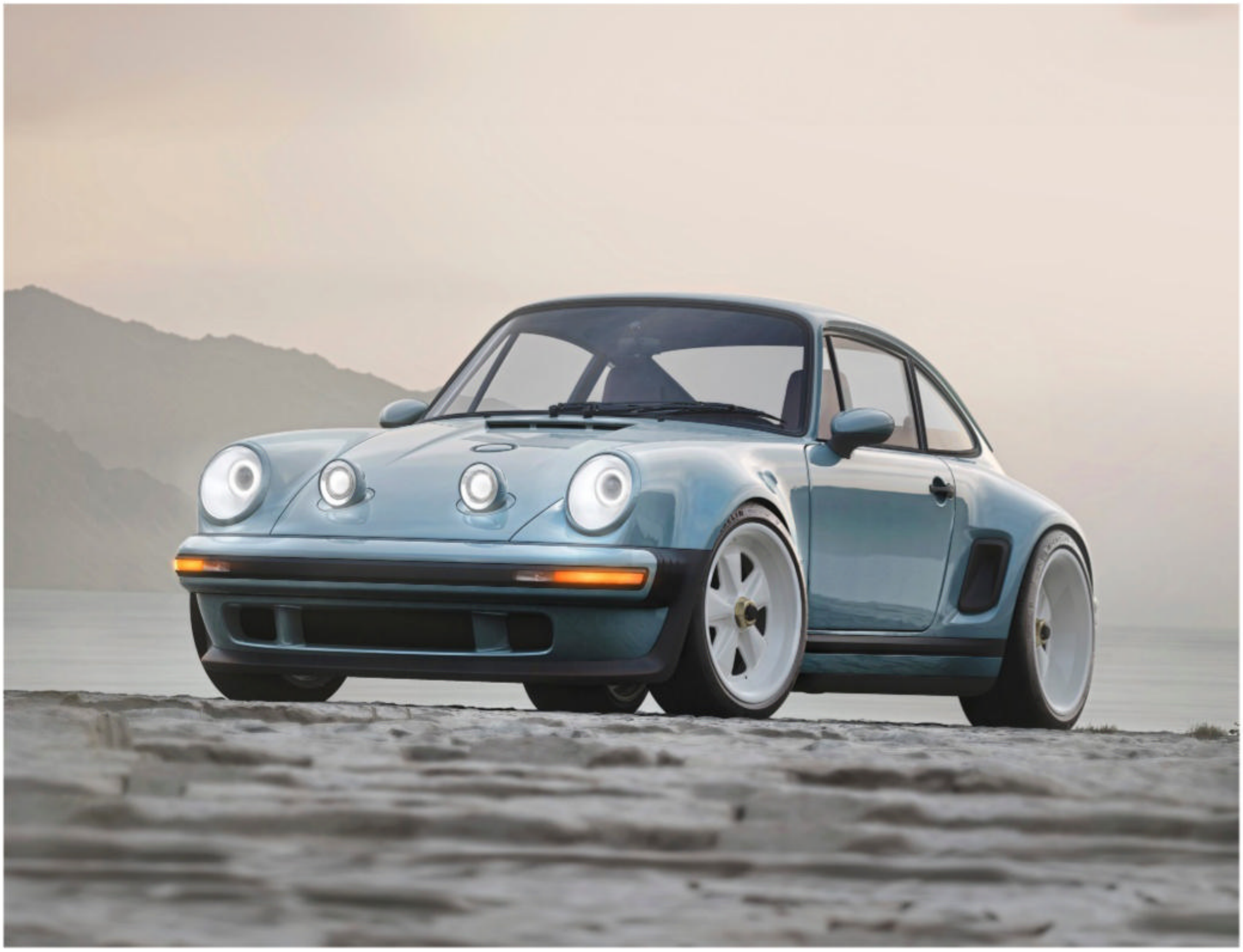
All of which meant that, for the first time, Singer found itself without a naturally-aspirated offering – a crying shame given the skills, technologies and engineering solutions it's been busy developing, including new Bosch traction and stability control systems, not to mention a six-speed Ricardo gearbox and new solutions to improve the stiffness and consistency of its restored 964 bodies. Hence this car, the restoration service Dickinson and Fawaz consider the pick of their body of work to date.

Externally it shares much with the Classic Turbo's silhouette, albeit trading that service's '70s Turbo inspiration for a look that riffs hard on the rare wide-bodied Carreras Porsche offered in the '80s while also incorporating Singer's now-trademark stance and broad-hipped muscularity. And where the Classic Turbo restoration offers a modicum of refinement and touring ability, the Carrera Coupe is closer to Dickinson's original mission statement for Singer's output: 'Look great, be built like a Rolex and go down the road like a f*cking weapon.' Deliberately rawer and more alive in character, the Carrera Coupe restorations are intended for fast road and track use – a 'big-hearted, naturally-aspirated sports car' limited to just 100 units.

As per Singer's mission statement, 'everything is important', the turbo-free flat-six is a work of art, technically and aesthetically. To see the thing, complete with its almost Art Deco cooling fan/intake plenum installation, is to wonder if the word 'engine' might lack the scope to do it justice. Where the DLS restorations leant on Williams and its ability to deliver the savage revs and power required, Singer worked with Cosworth to hatch this new 4.0-litre motor. The specification is wild, like updating a Spitfire with autopilot, ram jets and onboard wi-fi. It features four valves per cylinder (for 414bhp and a broad spread of torque), liquid-cooled heads and the promise of a soundtrack to shred your ears and swell your heart – all the way to 8000rpm and beyond.

Singer worked with Cosworth to hatch this new 4.0-litre motor. The specification is wild

'Mature is the word that comes to mind for the engine and really the whole car,' explains Fawaz. 'Development for the Classic Turbo service was comprehensive. We got into everything, and we approached this project using all of the things we've learned along the way. And with this engine we had very specific ideas of what we wanted to do with it. It wasn't like we went to Cosworth, gave them a horsepower figure and asked them to sort it out. We want to do something very specific; very torquey for road use,



very smooth, and we wanted the emissions controls [to make this a truly global motor] in place on every engine. Doing that while retaining the torque and the power… that's when we decided to add variable valve timing. It's not a new thing, of course, but it's new for us.'

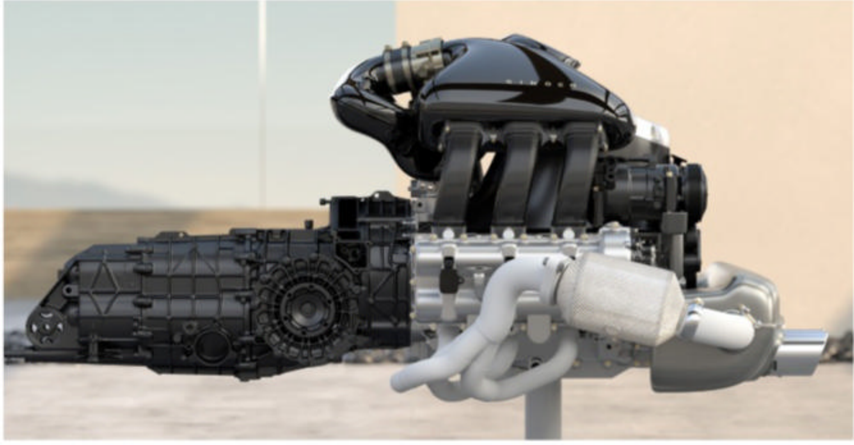
The cooling fan, being electric rather than belt-driven, has been re-positioned, for better packaging and to more democratically cool all six cylinders. And while Cosworth set down the basic volumes and shapes for the plenums, Dickinson's design team then massaged them into the Tate-worthy sculptures you see here, including subtly different curves to the two sets of runners to negate the cylinder offset and make the plenums symmetrical.

The engine mounts into a monocoque restored to a level of rigidity appropriate for a car this fast and focused. On top of Singer's usual welding work, composite and steel reinforcements have been created in association with Red Bull Advanced Technologies and its world-class simulation and structural analysis facilities. Four-way adjustable dampers (you can tweak them on the fly, from the cockpit), ceramic brakes and 18-inch centre-lock wheels mounting Michelin Pilot Sport rubber complete the chassis spec. Options include two styles of front end and rear wing – restrained or high-downforce; your call – a trunk for the alternative aero parts you're not using that day, and auxiliary driving lamps that rise from the bonnet when required and fold down flush when not in use.

The design was 18 months in the making, with Dickinson sweating all the stuff, big and small. And if this might just be his perfect 911 well, that's probably no accident. 'Fifteen years ago, if you'd put a gun to my head and asked me what my perfect 911 would be, I'd have told you it was a normally-aspirated F model that maybe tipped its hat to the ST from 1971,' he says. 'Seventeen years on, as an old man of nearly 60, I'd like to be sitting on corduroy [it's an option, and it looks sweet] in something that's fast, lightweight and punchy in the midrange.'

For a fortunate few, that dream will now be made metal (and corduroy).

Funky auxiliary driving lights the cherry on the cake



INDUSTRY TRENDS

Mission impossible: save the small car

Jake Groves News editor

▶ **Lighter. Cheaper. Simpler. More efficient.** That's the kind of cars Europeans want and need, according to the people running the Renault Group and rival Stellantis. Bosses Luca de Meo and John Elkann joined forces at the *Financial Times*' Future of the Car summit to raise a red flag about the industry's trend in the opposite direction.

Cars have become large and heavy to meet safety requirements, to satisfy space- and safety-hungry families and because of the size and weight of EV batteries. It's also difficult to make a profit on small, light cars when so much safety and anti-pollution hardware is involved. This encourages car makers to build larger SUVs that carry higher price tags, which can be more profitable. Some buyers don't need a big car but for many they've become the norm.

Both de Meo and Elkann have also rallied against incoming bans on engines, arguing that there must be a new approach to emissions controls that considers the lifecycle of a car, not just what comes out the back.

All of which goes some way to explaining why Denis Le Vot, head of Dacia, is feeling rather smug. His Renault-owned company has largely held out against the trend to bigger, heavier and more expensive, instead championing practicality, simplicity and affordability.

'This is the moment,' he tells *CAR* just hours after Elkann and de Meo made their stand. 'Regulations have been pushing us to a point where affordable mobility doesn't exist any more.' Cleaner powertrains, more safety systems, improved recyclability – all are being imposed at the same time. 'Put all these together and it becomes impossible to get this all down to a decent price, particularly for a four-metre-or-less car. I think it's very fair and intelligent to ask if we went too far.'

Some of Dacia's cost saving is down to keeping manufacturing cheaper and tapping into Renault Group economies of scale. But the rest comes from minimising the amount of equipment fitted to its cars – including, controversially, a decision to not chase the maximum star rating from the Euro NCAP safety assessment scheme.

Like de Meo and Elkann, he thinks the focus on tailpipe emissions doesn't look at the big picture. 'The lifecycle assessment can give very different results; look at an electric car in Poland with 100 per cent coal-originated electricity compared with something like a Bigster hybrid somewhere else, for example.'

De Meo sees it as a way to get dirty, unsafe older cars off the road in favour of cleaner, if not entirely zero-emissions, new cars. 'A big step is to not have the punishment, but the necessity to do a better job and win competitiveness by investing in more than one technology. The principle of technological neutrality has underpinned [every European] regulation since forever – except for cars.'

What happens now? Will de Meo and Elkann's strong words make a difference? Le Vot is optimistic, pointing to the fact that a plan to examine lifecycle emissions will be on the table when the European Commission next addresses the subject.

Dacia has a long way to go in its crusade for right-sizing

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A LEAP FORWARD

NEW CARS

At last, Citroën takes the big-car hint

Jake Groves News editor

▶ **You'll have noticed that Citroën** is weird. Some weird Citroëns have been small, like the game-changing 2CV and the unusable C3 Pluriel. Some have been innovative and useful, like the Xsara Picasso. Many have been large.

More specifically, large and often unpopular. Cars like the DS, SM, CX, C6 and, most recently, the C5 X. They were all weird shapes and had weird styling details and were filled with weird engineering. The DS at the start of that list is an all-time great – described by *CAR*'s Gavin Green as the 'biggest single design and technical leap in car history' – and the CX can be seen as the last great Citroën before Peugeot took ownership. But through the years their successors became plainer and less popular.

Weirdness aside, they were some of the most innovative cars on the road. Swivelling headlights, hydro-pneumatic suspension and concave glass are just three examples of smart (or at least different) thinking some of those cars launched with. They've won admirers worldwide – but the line ends here.

The trouble is that individuality simply doesn't sell. And while the C5 X is arguably the least innovative in that lineage of Citroën flagships – it uses a common Stellantis platform and tech, and its Progressive Hydraulic Suspension is used on various smaller Citroëns too – it still looks interesting. But it's sold badly, so much so that production is being wound down, with the final right-hand-drive versions leaving the factory around the time this issue of *CAR* goes to press. No replacement is planned.

'This kind of car, the C5 X, was not a success for us,' says Caroline Malleus, Citroën's product and strategy director. 'We see that people in this segment are looking for more luxuries and premium brands, so this is not a targeted segment [for Citroën] any more.'

That segment being the D-segment, where the C5 X is up against more conventional and well established cars such as the BMW 3-series, Mercedes C-Class and Audi A5 – cars that are regarded as prestigious and which remain in demand on the used market, making them sensible financial investments.

Citroën has decided it just can't compete, so it's going to stop trying. Instead, you need to look one rung down the ladder to the C-SUV segment to find the car that by default becomes its flagship, the new C5 Aircross.

CEO Thierry Koskas – who is about to leave Citroën – acknowledges that Citroën has moved on from the big, wafty saloon full of weird ideas. Instead, the key qualities are comfort and value, in more conventional packaging.

The new C5 Aircross sits on the Stellantis group's STLA Medium platform and will be available with battery and hybrid (both plug-in and not) powertrains. In all its guises it will offer decent range and an emphasis on comfort, and will wear the same face as the latest C3 and C4.

It's exactly the same strategy employed by other mainstream Stellantis brands: Vauxhall with the Grandland, Corsa and Astra, Peugeot with the 3008, 208 and 308, and now even Jeep with the Compass and Avenger. Cars designed not to excite or surprise, but to sell. And any heritage or national identity is no more than skin deep.

'The C5 Aircross is supposed to be our flagship at the end of the day, which means I don't think that Citroën has much to do with the D-segment where we are with C5 X,' Koskas says. 'It's not selling too badly in the countries where we sell it, but it's such a tight segment.

'With C5 Aircross, it's probably the most advanced and best car we have, it's packed with technology, super comfortable,' Koskas adds. 'I don't need something bigger, and I'm not sure how to sell something bigger.'

DS is eternal; C5 X unlikely to be remembered next week;

So forget about big Citroëns, and while you're at it forget about Citroën's products being weird or even particularly French. But at least the company itself still seems to have some surviving weirdness in its culture. There are still glimmers of the manufacturer that in 1922 made the first motorised crossing of the Sahara with a convoy of half-track B2s, and that built the first car to be driven all the way round Australia, a 5CV in 1923. And it was Citroën that with 1934's Traction Avant introduced to the mass market three features that soon became ubiquitous: front-wheel drive, independent suspension on all four wheels and a fully integrated chassis and body.

The year 2025 marks 100 years since the company – which started making cars in 1919 – created the largest advertisement the world had ever seen. It took the form of illuminating the Eiffel Tower in the centre of Paris with brightly lit Citroën lettering.

That sort of stunt wouldn't go down well with the pollution-conscious, car-averse city officials of Paris in 2025, but Citroën still pushed the boat out to mark the centenary. It did this by putting on an interpretive dance show, with performers acting out Citroën's early days and its current values via movement and music. That's certainly a lot weirder than you get with Vauxhall.

They've won admirers worldwide, but the line stops here. The trouble is that individuality doesn't sell

Software-defined: what it means, why it matters

Ben Miller Editor

▶ **Jargon is the enemy of** understanding. So prepare to understand 2025's most overused bit of automotive jargon: the 'software-defined vehicle'.

It's worth getting this stuff right, so here's RJ Scaringe. Rivian's founder and CEO is closer to the concept than most. His achingly cool EV brand builds nothing but software-defined vehicles. And it's so good at it the VW Group's spent big to establish a joint venture that'll see Rivian tech at the heart of a new generation of Group products, kicking off with the VW ID. Every1.

Scaringe: 'When we talk about software-defined we're talking about a vehicle in which its features, the way they're executed and – importantly – the way they can evolve is driven by software.

'Say, for example, you're designing the sequence of events when you walk up to the car with a key in your pocket. Traditionally you'd have to set into motion the requirements around that way before launch, and those would be locked. The sounds it's going to make, what the air conditioning's going to do, how the seat's going to adjust, some sort of visual indicator from the lights, battery preparation if it's an electric car… there are a lot of requirements that go into it. In the past all those requirements get baked into software across many different suppliers. This makes a holistic update very difficult, because you'd have to coordinate many different suppliers to deliver a new update over the air.

'With our vehicles, it's all housed in a single controller with entirely Rivian software. If we want to add an owl sound when you unlock the car on Hallowe'en, we can. It's easy because we control everything about the digital stack. I'm using a simple example but it can just as easily be dynamic features, like an entirely new off-road drive mode. These are things we can easily add with updates. And we do.

'We do a monthly software release. In the early days it was a lot of bug fixes. Today there are fewer bug fixes and it's mostly new features; things customers are looking for, and things we can see they might want based on how they're using the vehicle.'

The move to software-defined cars is huge. As huge as the move to mass production, perhaps, in the first decade of the last century. 'The first automotive revolution was when we fully industrialised car production,' says Heiko Huettel, vice president for software products at Harman Automotive. 'The second was the likes of Toyota implementing just-in-time production. The third revolution is software-defined vehicles.'

As Scaringe points out, the first car computers arrived with electronic fuel injection, and from there the ECU count increased exponentially. 'Before we knew it, there were hundreds of these things in the car, all communicating over a simple CAN architecture. But if you were to design a car from scratch with a lot of compute capabilities, would you design it with 100 little computers built by many different companies with different software stacks, none of which were consistent or holistic? No.'

Rivian's RJ Scaringe: he's helping define the software-defined future

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Carney has the diplomatic skills and the determination

Getty images

TRADE WARS

The car industry has a new saviour

Ben Oliver Contributing editor

▶ **If you really want to** know what a world leader thinks, ask them when they're out of office. Or in Mark Carney's case, between high offices. I met him when he attended Nucleus, the private conference on the future of mobility held on the fringes of the Goodwood Festival of Speed and often described as 'the automotive Davos'. Carney had quit the governorship of the Bank of England but not yet acceded to the Prime Ministership of Canada, though he was doubtless considering it.

The nature of Nucleus means I can't report the detail of the discussion, but in broad terms he gave the most honest, cogent and chilling analysis I'd yet heard of the trend towards deglobalisation, tariffs and trade wars which is now remaking the world economy. In 10 years of attending the event, it was the single best address I've heard.

We think of the US Big Three car makers as all-American but 25 to 40 per cent of their cars are made in Canada or Mexico

But Carney's prescience didn't extend to envisioning Donald Trump back in the White House and imposing tariffs on even America's closest trading partners, with Carney himself as Trump's leading Western opponent after winning the Canadian Liberal Party's leadership election in March, and then a surprise fourth term for his party in April's election.

My job that day was to set the agenda for the debates and brief the speakers. Carney, unsurprisingly, required no briefing. Instead we hung around at the back of the venue with the smokers, Carney chatting with an ease which doesn't always come naturally to super-brain bankers, and immense charm.

That charm won't work on Trump, and nor is Carney attempting to deploy it publicly. Other Western leaders have been noticeably more conciliatory towards the US President, but their conflicts with him are mostly around trade and defence. For Canada it's also trade, although on a far bigger, almost existential scale, given that around three-quarters of Canadian exports go to the US. But it's also about something more fundamental: sovereignty.

Nobody actually expects US tanks to roll across the world's longest undefended border, but there's little doubt that Trump's faintly menacing offer to 'cherish' Canada as the 51st state, combined with the risk to the Canadian economy of his tariffs, handed Carney his premiership. The Liberal Party was toast before Trump's return.

Carney's rhetoric on 'the American betrayal' is far stronger than most other Western leaders as a result, and punchier than might come naturally to this charmer.

'America wants our land, our resources, our water,' he said after the election. 'But these are not idle threats. President Trump is trying to break us so that America can own us. That will never, ever happen.'

Short of a border incursion, the car industry is likely to be the focus of the new antagonism. Cars and car parts are Canada's second-largest export after oil, with 93 per cent of its automotive output going to the US. We think of the US Big Three car makers as all-American but their 'domestic' operations are actually transnational, split across what was, until January, the free-trade zone of the US, Canada and Mexico. Between 25 and 40 per cent of the Big Three's cars are made in Canada or Mexico.

Trump's belief that these long-established and well-integrated supply chains should be reshored has put the car industry in his crosshairs. While Carney's public pronouncements have been uncompromising, his administration has been working with Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum and the leaders of the Big Three car makers – Mary Barra at GM, Jim Farley at Ford and John Elkann at Stellantis – to mitigate the impact of the tariffs.

Model cycles are longer than electoral cycles. The cars the car makers are starting to design now will go on sale long after the end of Trump's term. Planning the plants where those models and their parts will be built takes even longer. The Big Three will be reluctant to make expensive changes if there might be Democrat in the White House when they're halfway through the process.

It's almost impossible for the car makers to fix any firm plans now anyway, when the new tariff regime changes on a weekly basis. As I write, the Trump administration has just announced partial rebates on tariffs on parts imported from countries other than Canada and Mexico, a belated recognition that in many cases there is no choice but to import. As the new administration begins to understand the realities of the world's most complex and valuable supply chain, and the likely impact of tariffs on US corporate profits and the prices paid by consumers, the watering-down is likely to continue, reducing the need to do much about the tariffs other than make short-term, tactical changes, and endure them.

Elkann, chair of Stellantis, only runs it because he hasn't been able to find anyone to replace Carlos Tavares as CEO. The best candidates don't want the job in these circumstances, and this isn't the premiership Carney would have wanted either. This progressive technocrat with an interest in sustainability would rather have been building than firefighting, but he wouldn't have got the job in other circumstances. He must steer the Canadian economy through the biggest upheaval in its history. Maintaining a functioning car industry will be a victory.

Having led the Bank of Canada through the global financial crisis and the Bank of England though Brexit, there's little doubt Carney is the right person for the job. The irony that his nemesis indirectly hired him will not be lost on him.

US icons actually built in Mexico and Canada respectively

Agony, from the comfort of your armchair

Colin Overland Production editor

▶ **The timing is weird, in** this age of live streaming, but you'll soon forgive it that. Because the newly released documentary about the 2023 Dakar Rally is quite brilliant.

That, you'll recall, was the middle year of Audi's big-budget plan to win the world's toughest off-road race with an electric range-extender, with a driver line-up led by Carlos Sainz Senior.

The Dakar: Race Against the Desert is a slick 85-minute documentary, produced in association with Red Bull, that's now streaming on various platforms. It's well worth the £3.99. Yes, it embraces some of the cliches: lots of slow motion, drone shots of camels and moody music. But at its heart it's a superbly well told story of a handful of (Red Bull-aligned) drivers and riders from around the world as they prepare for and then compete in the 2023 event, directed by Jalil Lespert.

Those competitors with the temperament to tackle the Dakar Rally all seem to have a certain humility, necessary when you're charging for two weeks across a desert that goes out of its way to make life tricky. Even when you win, it comes close to wrecking you.

Sainz is clearly an exceptional human being – age 61 at the time of the 2023 race – who wins at life as well as winning a lot of races. But he too acknowledges the peril and precariousness of every second in the desert, even with the might of Audi behind him. He crashed out of the 2023 race quite horribly.

This big-budget professionalism is a big contrast to the early days of Dakar. Dig out your copy of *Madness in the Desert*, the 59-minute TV documentary from 2013 directed by Richard Heap and John L Matthews, as a reminder. There's some incredibly evocative grainy footage of all shapes and sizes of vehicle heading from Paris down into Africa and across the Sahara to finish in the Senegalese capital, if they were lucky.

The unlikely star of the show is Mark Thatcher, son of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, interviewed decades after his car broke down in the desert in 1982 and he had to wait six days to be rescued. Like many competitors at that time, when there was minimal factory backing and, in Thatcher's case, minimal preparation, it wasn't about winning – he was there out of curiosity and a desire to face the challenge posed by the desert.

Of the Sahara, he says: 'It's haunting, it's changing all the time, it has an abiding beauty to it.' And of the event: 'It encapsulates imagination, challenge, romance and to a certain extent competition – all the elements that mankind has to endure every day.'

Madness in the Desert and *Race Against the Desert* combine to tell a story of an event becoming more professional, more competitive, more technologically advanced, but still fundamentally the same, albeit it's relocated from Africa to South America and now Saudi Arabia. How odd that an event which is more or less unwatchable as it happens should now have generated two world-class documentaries.

Even Sainz can't make the Dakar look easy

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Sex? It's over-rated

The Renault 5 has all the glamour and excitement, but it's the frumpier, roomier and far more versatile 4 that actually delivers the goods

Words Alan Taylor-Jones **Photography** Malcolm Griffiths

Bigger than the 5, and that extra size is put to good use

It was always my intention to go off-road in the new Renault 4, although at this precise moment I am regretting the decision. I've reversed down a steep gravel incline to turn around and have another crack at the dirt track the 4 handled so enjoyably moments ago, only to get knobbled by a combination of road-only tyres and my own over-confidence.

As soon as I select Drive and apply a single toe's worth of pressure to the accelerator, the front wheels start to spin, and the traction control kicks in. Not ideal, but I am inching slowly back up the incline as the economy-optimised Michelins ping gravel back down the slope. I glance at my mirrors to ensure angry Portuguese home owners haven't noticed me ploughing the track to their driveway as I slowly crest the brow of the hill. Perhaps it's time to get back to the tarmac.

Those familiar with the original R4 – the versatile, great-value, function-first, flair-last car launched in 1961, and still in production until 1994 – will understand my fascination with the rough stuff here. Both the original 4 and the reboot rely on a raised ride height, four-wheel independent suspension and light weight rather than a complex four-wheel-drive system to keep going on difficult terrain. (Renault has recently unveiled a concept called the 4 Savane 4x4, complete with second electric motor and all-wheel drive. Don't be one bit surprised if that turns into a production car.)

All-wheel drive and some dirt-friendly rubber would certainly have made my ascent as stress-free as the rest of my time off-road in the new EV. And maybe a little more suspension travel, aiming for something along the lines of the plushness of the original car's torsion-beam set-up.

In any case, the new car isn't performing badly at all. I'm being jostled around on some truly horrendous surfaces, yet the worst of it is being handled by the R4, rather than passed on to me, and I'm not hearing any nasty scraping or graunching from underneath. In other words, the car will probably be ready, willing and able to go further off-road than the driver would dare.

All of which is very impressive given that the 4 is closely related to the smaller 5, a car that is excellent in many ways, but those ways don't include even a fraction of off-road ambition. Both cars sit on Renault's AmpR Small platform, with the 4 gaining around 8cm of wheelbase and 12cm of rear overhang, pushing it beyond four metres in length.

To my eyes it doesn't quite have the 5's stylistic swagger, and that's more or less by design. It pumps some muscle into the slab-sided original's wheelarches and makes it far less upright in profile, while still having a resemblance to the old car. Details such as the third window along the side, the tall, flat tailgate and the fake grille with fashionable illuminated elements really lift it out of the ordinary. And you'll doubtless be heartened to learn that a full-length electrically folding canvas sunroof will soon be available as an option.

Mix of virtual and physical controls is good; selector stalk can be fiddly, though

While the original 5 was always a looker, the 4 was all about utility and simply covered the mechanical components in a useful box that could hold lots of stuff. History has repeated itself: the 21st century 5 is the one with the mission to steal people's hearts; the 4 is out to capture their minds.

A squeeze of the boot release activates an electric tailgate that gets some of its height from cutting deep into the black plastic rear bumper. It's very easy to load bags and cases into the 420-litre boot, and there's a 55-litre underfloor storage bin in reserve.

It's an impressive figure for the class and is only beaten by the pricier Ford Puma Gen-E. Flatpack fans won't appreciate the big step up from the boot floor to the backs of the folded 60/40-split rear bench, and there's no height-adjustable floor to level the load area. A couple of straps on the sides of the boot, some hooks and useful cubbies will help ensure loose items aren't doing laps of the cargo area as you drive.

I close the boot and move to the driver's seat, and at first glance this could be a 5 on the inside. I'm not complaining. The rounded-rectangle instrument binnacle topped by some Casio-like buttons for volume and turning off the ▶

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▼ **MINUS**

Battery eats into rear footwell; ride lacks suppleness

Pick-up: 0 miles

Some colleagues haven't been too kind about the 4's styling. Seeing it in person confirms they all need to go to Specsavers – it's neat and different.

3 miles

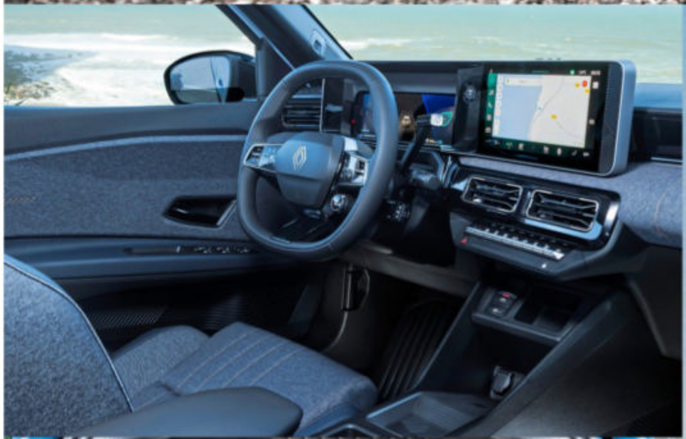
Although we've brought plenty of kit, the 4 has enough space to swallow it all without having to fold a seat or access the under-boot storage area.

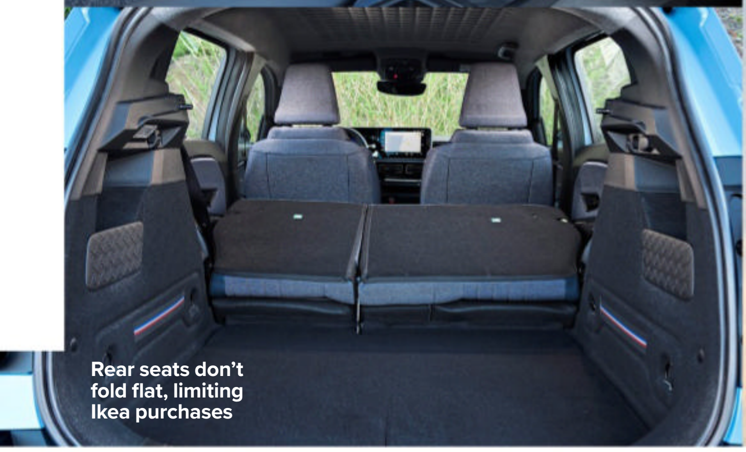
11 miles

The 4's pastel shades fit perfectly with some of the local architecture, although setting a route that involves only blue houses might be tricky.

>>

181lb ft of torque doesn't sound much; it's plenty





Rear seats don't fold flat, limiting Ikea purchases

45 miles

Portugal is amazing for spotting stuff that just dissolves in the UK. A Citroën XM parked next to an '80s Nissan Patrol certainly warrants a picture stop.

64 miles

Casio-style buttons on the top of the instrument binnacle make it easy for your passenger to adjust the volume, or for you to do it without looking.

147 miles

Much excitement as I spot a Fiat Punto Cabrio. A canvas roof will soon be available as an extra on the 4. What is it about French cars and canvas roofs?

While the original 5 was a looker, the 4 put utility first. History has repeated itself

infotainment is very 1980s in shape, but anachronistically filled with a 10.1-inch touchscreen and, depending on which trim level you've gone for, either a 7.0- or 10.3-inch driver's display. Padded fabric is used far more than soft-touch plastic, a trick shared with the rival Mini Aceman. Customers of the 4 get a different choice of materials and patterns than 5 buyers.

Our car's mid-spec Techno trim has denim, and very comfortable it is too. Then all it takes is two presses of an easily reached physical button to switch off the lane assist and speed-limit pinger, and we're ready to drive away.

The 4 shares the 5's quick steering rack, needing less than a turn and a half to hit the lockstops, and it proves easy to position the car with accuracy and confidence, even though a national holiday here in Portugal means the roads are rammed with traffic, leaving precious few gaps on roundabouts. A stab of the accelerator gives a soft initial ramp up of power before I scoot eagerly into a slot between cars.

I have a theory I'd like to test, and I know just the place to do it. A short drive later we're in the seaside town of Paço de Arcos at a spot popular with the local fishermen. I carefully reverse up to the edge of the concrete and avoid parking the 4 in the Atlantic 20 feet below us. Tailgate up, the low boot floor makes for a perfect perch with some protection from the elements. Fill the removable underfloor storage box with ice, and you can even keep your catches fresh for teatime. Alternatively, do as the locals do and repurpose a supermarket shopping trolley as a BBQ.

So far the roads have been far too smooth, straight and unchallenging for my liking, so I'm heading towards the Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. My route includes a delightful drive along the coast, the 30km/h limit (just under 20mph) meaning I've ample time for spotting birds and old bangers. A fleet of Portuguese-made UMM Alter 4x4s drive past packed with tourists, ticking so many boxes for fans of rare and funky vehicles. Precious few of our feathery friends, though. Maybe I'll have more luck inland.

As the road spears off from the coastline and starts winding uphill, its surface deteriorates and it becomes apparent the 4 is relatively firm. Renault engineers tell me the set-up is softer than the 5's, but not by much. The intention was to keep the 5's cornering verve rather than chase Citroënesque cushiness, and it's a success. There's enough suppleness to smooth out the initial hit, and good body control so there's no bobbing about after you've clobbered a nasty rut. You're more aware of the road's surface than you would be in an electric C3 Aircross, but you're not getting battered against it like you would be in an Aceman.

Cornering behaviour is similarly Goldilocks. The quick steering gains just enough heft to avoid feeling nervous, giving a frisson of feel from the front tyres. I find it preferable to the Aceman's artificially heavy steering and overly thick steering wheel.

That girthy rim does connect you to a livelier driving experience, though. In isolation the 4 is keen. The boxy body doesn't lollop over like an original 4, with the small lean angles and decent front grip making it enjoyable to hustle around tight twists and hairpins. Braking deep into the bends helps pin the nose, but Mini levels of adjustability are not on offer here, with understeer and ESC intervention all you'll find beyond the tyres' limits of adhesion. Still, I'm having fun in between the sleepy villages.

Only the larger of the 5's two batteries is available in the 4. Its 52kWh size is average for the class and gives it a useful official range of up to 247 miles. Not that I'm going to regard that as a serious indication of how far it will travel in reality. There's only so much I can learn in two days with the 4, but I'm being as rigorous and methodical as I can in search of a plausible set of figures.

The temperature is 20-23°C and it's mostly dry, so more or less like a decent English summer day, and that shouldn't tax the battery. A mix of roads, including a fair bit of motorway, nets a respectable efficiency figure of 4.3 miles per kWh, which would equate to a 223-mile range. ▶

Another electric Renault that looks like a huge hit

184 miles

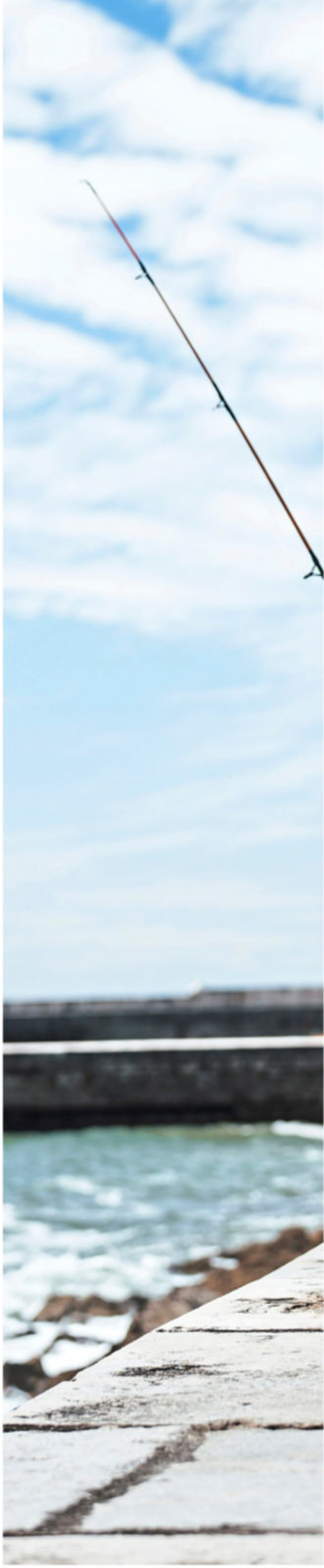
There's no way I can drive through water or mud without making a big splash. And then doing it again. And then one more time. The 4 is unperturbed by this.

186 miles

Gravel quickly turns into cobbles and back again on our Portuguese coastal route. It's no magic carpet, but the 4's ride is perfectly acceptable.

254 miles

What a fantastic car. Much more useful than the 5, and with a different sort of charm. Drives well, should be easy to live with, and affordable too.



This drops to 4.0 miles per kWh the following day with even more motorway work, still good for 208 miles of range and basically the same at the R5 I'd tested the week before in similar conditions. Factoring in my experience over six months in an electric Renault Scenic, I reckon the 4 will do around 150 miles on a charge once the weather gets colder. (Like the Scenic, the 4 comes with a heat pump, but the Scenic's didn't seem to do a great job of making life easier for the battery in cooler conditions.)

Suddenly I spot a Range Rover Sport on a dirt track in the valley below us and I know it's time to explore. A quick three-point turn reminds me of one of the 4's few annoyances – the drive selector. I don't mind its location on the steering column, even after I grab the wiper stalk by accident. No, the issue is just how careful and deliberate you have to be to select D rather than N or R.

I'm sure it's a safety thing, but it's counter-productive. In my hurry to spin around before getting T-boned, I quickly select what I think is Reverse only to shoot forward for a moment. You need to be v-e-r-y slow and deliberate, holding the stick to the desired cog for what feels like an unnaturally long time.

Dirt track found, it's time to off-road. Initially the surface is no rougher than your average town street in the UK, but soon we're finding bigger rocks, ruts and even a water splash for the 4 to deal with. All is good, mostly. Which is where we came in…

I arrive back at the hotel with my mud-covered 4 to a few raised eyebrows, but I think it looks terrific. Time to get my stuff out of the car, have a quick poke in the back, and then collect my thoughts.

Where the 5's rear footwell is too small for even my tiny size six feet unless the front seats have been jacked up, the 4 is much more accommodating. There's still plenty of rear footwell intrusion from the battery pack, if a lot more of a gap than in the 5. You get more rear kneeroom too, so four six-footers will fit with some degree of comfort. Make no mistake, this is a viable family car, something the 5 certainly isn't.

So where does all this leave the 4? Potentially you're looking at a new class leader here. It shares the award-winning 5's good points. For instance, buttons. Where other manufacturers are hell bent on removing every last button, Renault learned the folly of this years ago. That means the 4's interior doesn't just look good with its fancy fabrics and retro touches, it's easy – and safe – to use whether you're parked on your drive or buzzing down the outside lane of the M25. It's also a satisfying steer that blends comfort and handling well, while providing plenty of power.

With a respectable range and seriously competitive pricing, it would appear Renault has another hit on its hands. It might not be as desirable, but I wonder how many people are going to be lured to showrooms by the 5, only to find the 4 is the car to actually meet their needs. Me? I'd walk straight past the 5 and plonk myself firmly in a 4, thanks. **car**

Next Month

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Data

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ON SALE
September

RATING
★★★★★

Potentially you're looking at a new class leader here. It shares the award-winning 5's good points

I've experienced many Range Rovers, and this can feel just as luxurious

As glam in Gangnam as it will be in Gosport

HYUNDAI IONIQ 9

Your move, JLR

The real rival to the electric Range Rover is from Korea

This car will be better overall than an electric Range Rover. A bold statement, but one I'll argue until I'm blue in the face, or until I'm proved wrong in a back-to-back comparison test.

As you'll know from our last issue, the electric Range Rover is shaping up (albeit extremely slowly) to be something very attractive. But you'd expect the best at its predicted price of £170k. Hyundai's new Ioniq 9 can keep up – perhaps even do better – and you could buy two for the (predicted) price of one e-Rangie.

Around 300 miles from a 117kWh battery for the Range Rover? The Ioniq 9 claims between 320 and 385 (depending on spec) from a smaller 110kWh pack. The e-Rangie will trounce the Ioniq 9 on torque, yes, but only manages a 0.7sec faster 0-62mph sprint time than the Performance AWD flagship version of the Hyundai. The Ioniq 9 will (insiders insist) also charge significantly faster and yet will still seat up to seven people comfortably, and comes with all the latest tech you'd expect from a luxe family barge.

'But you're missing the point! The Range Rover is a luxury car!' Of course it is. I've been lucky enough to experience many Rangies of all sorts of performance levels and in various trims. But the Ioniq 9, in many places, can feel just as luxurious. The interior is enormously flexible, with six- or seven-seat configurations, optional recliners with legrests, massaging functions, device mounting points, more cupholders than you know what to do with, and a level of fit and finish that'll impress the Germans.

On a long drive, it's super quiet – an impressive feat given how block-like the body is. The steeply raked windscreen and super smooth nose mean wind noise is actually pretty well controlled. Yes, there is the odd thud from the suspension over the jankiest of manhole covers, but it's broadly a settled and purposeful cruiser – just like a Range Rover is. We wouldn't mind if the 9 had a smidge less bodyroll, mind, but by comparison, a Kia EV9 (particularly in GT-Line spec) feels crashy and jittery more often. None of that here.

Lots of nooks and crannies for losing things

Hyundai's nailed the smoothness of power delivery, without any twitchiness from the throttle and with a well-defined ramp-up of power as you build speed. Frankly, the flagship Performance AWD model we've tested here is a little much; the lower-powered Long Range RWD and AWD versions won't overwhelm the physical brakes so much.

'But the Rangie will be better off-road!' And that may well be true. You'd expect so for a car that has adjustable air suspension. But who takes a full-size Range Rover off-road these days?! That's a bit like using a Fabergé egg as a holder for dunking your soldiers – far too messy and uncouth.

So, I reiterate: not only is the Ioniq 9 more user-friendly than the much more expensive Volvo EX90 and a smoother ride than the church-hall-sized Kia EV9, but it can keep up with an electric Range Rover for much, much less. Direct your ire to the usual address. I'll be waiting.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

A large family EV with grace, pace and space – and one that'll be significantly cheaper than an EX90 or e-Rangie

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

30 seconds
It's huge, yes, but it oddly doesn't *look* as big as the similar Kia EV9

6 minutes
Hyundai's infotainment is menu-heavy – hurrah for some physical buttons

21 minutes
The overall interior is so clever – storage and good sense everywhere

42 minutes
There's the odd thud from the ride, but this is impressively comfy over long distances

53 minutes
Performance AWD version is too much for the brakes to handle

PLUS

Smooth and quiet; hugely flexible interior; feels like a quality product

MINUS

Busy infotainment; brakes are weak; vast

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From £65,000 (£80k as tested, both est)	110.3kWh battery, two e-motors, all-wheel drive	429bhp, 516lb ft, 5.2sec 0-62mph, 124mph	2400kg (est)	3.2 miles per kWh, 320-385-mile range (both est), 0g/km	Summer 2025 in Europe

SUZUKI eVITARA

The karma chameleon

Suzuki's Vitara wears a new mask to stay on the right side of history

Quite a big deal when you introduce your first ever battery-electric production car. And Suzuki, ever keen to keep its super loyal buyers in the UK and Europe on side, has given it a name that really resonates.

In the course of more than 35 years 'Vitara' has meant everything from tough 'n' ready utility vehicle to fun wagon for beach bums and, more recently, family-friendly all-rounder. What's united the many versions is a certain charm and a ruggedness that attracts folk who want something reliable and no-nonsense. This new one, named eVitara, is designed to parachute Suzuki right into the middle of the small-electric-crossover war zone. You know the type: Ford Puma Gen-E, Vauxhall Mokka Electric, Peugeot E-2008, Smart #1, Volvo EX30… that sort of thing.

Suzuki doesn't deny that it needs the eVitara in its line-up to help it satisfy emissions requirements. But don't think of it as a car created reluctantly and with minimal effort – it's actually better than that.

Underneath, the eVitara uses the 'Heartect-e' platform, an electric spin-off of the impressive architecture used by the latest Swift. If the body looks a little familiar, that's because the eVitara's twinned with the new Toyota Urban Cruiser. Suzuki maintains it was the lead partner in developing the platform, interior and technology.

Two battery sizes – 49kWh and 61kWh – are available, and you can get an eVitara with two- or all-wheel drive, which is a rarity in this segment. The longest-distance eVitara, the two-wheel-drive version with the 61kWh pack, can manage 267 miles of range. Power is a perfectly reasonable 142bhp for the front-drive version or 182bhp for the Allgrip-e model.

What Suzuki gets right, as it so often does, is how the eVitara drives. In the context of electric compact crossovers, there are some very sweet dynamics at play here. That squat stance allows for a good amount of grip, with the Allgrip-e model feeling particularly glued to the road. Bodyroll is also kept under tight control – no swaying heads when changing direction – and the ride is plump enough to soak up disruptions, giving a good balance: not so harsh it can't drive over a pebble without being crashy; not so soft that it wallows over undulations.

Slow screen will be irritating to use

The interior is as neat as the driving experience. Yes, there is a big hulking slab of gloss black in the centre console but, overall, the materials feel good and the use of physical buttons for crucial functions is very welcome. The infotainment needs some work, though; it's a very slow system, where a tap of the screen is typically followed by a full second before anything happens. Equally, the boot is small but sliding rear seats give some flexibility and rear passengers have more room than an electric Mokka.

All this adds up to quite an average car. Yes, there are some ways in which it is better than its crowded field of direct rivals – but also ways in which they best the Suzuki. Contrary to the slightly maverick spirit that's characterised Suzuki at its best, this is a jack of all trades and master of none.

JAKE GROVES

First verdict

Sweet to drive and tough-feeling – like all the best Suzukis – but doesn't win the tech race or the space race

★★★☆☆

THE FIRST HOUR

30 seconds
What a cutie! A mix of tough-yet-tiny design details

5 minutes
Interior feels like a slight step forward in quality for Suzuki

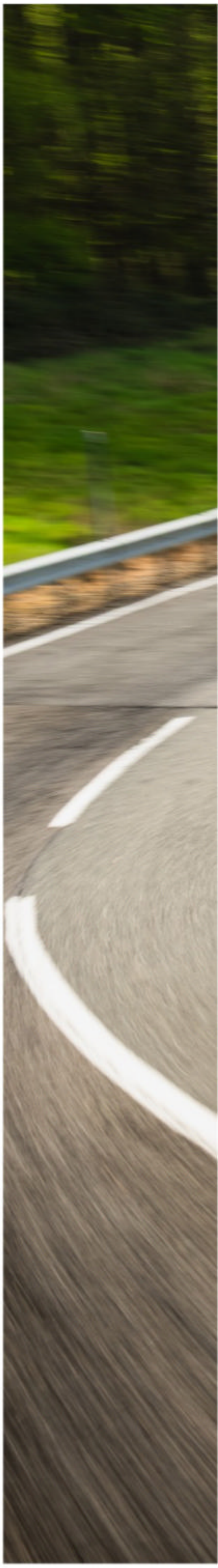
21 minutes
Yikes – the infotainment is very laggy, though…

39 minutes
Fabulous steering and body control on a country road

53 minutes
Perfectly fine on a motorway, if a bit blustery

▲ **PLUS**
Great steering; nippy and grippy to drive; well laid-out interior

▼ **MINUS**
Frustratingly slow infotainment; small boot; specs only average for the money



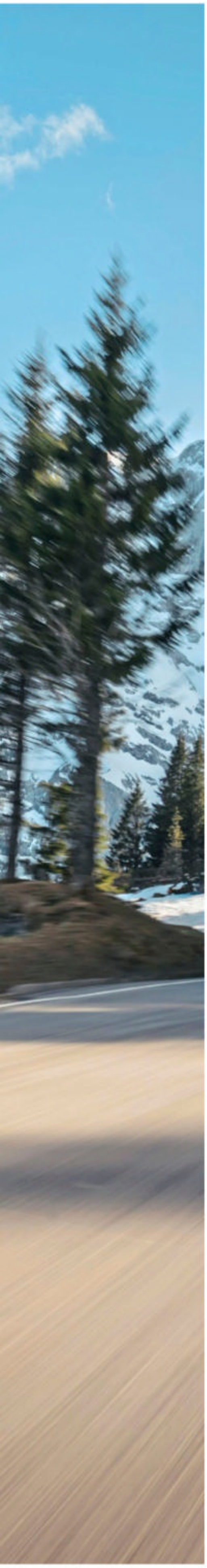
Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	From £32,000 (est; £35,000 est as tested)	61kWh battery, two e-motors, all-wheel drive	181bhp, 226lb ft, 7.4sec 0-62mph, 93mph	1899kg	4.0 miles per kWh (est), 267-mile range, 0g/km	Summer

The steering in particular is very satisfying, and body control is impressively neat

The eVitara's happy place: a tight corner

The last thing the old Vantage needed was to be any wider, and though this one is it doesn't feel it

More power means more heat means the grille's even bigger now



ASTON MARTIN VANTAGE ROADSTER

Halcyon daze

New Vantage Roadster turns the clock back to the good old days

Rainwater (not pictured) streams serenely across the Vantage's bonnet; frail rivulets oscillating to the fury of the twin-turbo V8 at work inches beneath the curved sheet metal across which they're moving. Glancing over my shoulder, I'm able to tear my eyes from the Roadster's outrageously muscular rear arches just long enough to admire the majestic wake of spray trailing us like a comet's tail. And then there's the noise: honeyed yet colossal, like tectonic shift through the warmest of effects pedals.

High in the Alps, the sky's an expressionist canvas of bruised blacks, cloud-marbled white and deepest azure. The gradients are ferocious, obviously, and the puzzles posed by the roads that criss-cross these mountains fiendishly three-dimensional. It is also raining. Caution feels appropriate, as does a roof, but we've come too far to worry too much about those.

Snug behind the fiercely raked screen we're out of reach of the rain, even with the roof down, and together the Aston's keen front axle, monumental performance and tidy traction are as unbothered by the weather as the ancient pines that stand sentinel beside the road. Happy days.

And these are happy days indeed for a marque as synonymous with boom and bust as James Bond. With the same laser-guided, big-spending precision with which he's put together the dreamiest F1 team on the grid (now it just needs time, and next year's fresh regs…), Lawrence Stroll has gifted Gaydon its best tilt yet at sustained greatness.

He's re-negotiated Aston's engine supply deal with AMG (hence this Vantage's massive power hike over its predecessor; previously Aston had to bow to AMG's hierarchy), green-lit the development of its own software architecture (the Vantage introduces both a tweaked driver's display and a shortcut button to deactivate the assists, both of which are being added to the coupe) and put ex-Bentley, Porsche and JLR man Adrian Hallmark in place to fine-tune the machine that makes and sells the machines.

Hallmark, looking only slightly less tanned and relaxed than we saw him last, at Bentley (his first months at Aston have been busy), describes the Roadster's arrival as the 'final phase of this phase of the company's transformation', which sounds hyperbolic right up until the moment you drive one of these new-era Astons, and ideally this new-era Aston – 'the bedrock of our sports-car character' as Hallmark puts it.

The previous Vantage arrived in 2017. Fresh out of the crate, it couldn't lay a glove on the by-then-not-all-that-new 911 GTS. The Aston enjoyed a modest power advantage but it was too wide, too basic inside, too lacking in composure and so messily traction-limited, even on a dry circuit, that the Porsche simply drove away from it. Now Aston Martin staff endlessly make 911 comparisons, and with good reason – it'd be a fight now, you sense, rather than a formality.

The new Vantage is very different animal to the car that came before, not least in its potency. Power and torque then were 503bhp and 505lb ft. They're now 656bhp and 590lb ft. But the really good news is that, as with last year's coupe, the new Vantage Roadster is much more than a snarling V8 in a to-die-for suit. Yes, it's gorgeous. And yes, it's quick. But it's also agile and tactile and, if not forgiving, then at least fully committed to the kind of dialogue that prevents problems in the first place. Beautifully balanced and rewarding to drive, it loses none of its predecessor's big-hearted charisma but adds so much raw talent to the mix it's hard to credit the two cars as consecutive steps on an evolutionary curve.

Which is nice. The new engine's numbers, in cahoots with my experience of the previous-gen car's near-limit trickiness and today's weather forecast, gave me a restless night. Breakfast was tackled with a knotted stomach and clammy palms. But now, an hour in, the fear is gone, and the Vantage and I are getting on like a house (rather than a roadster) on fire and I wish I'd brushed up on new Vantage coupe reviews as bedtime ▶

THE FIRST HOUR

30 seconds
Eight-layer, Z-fold hood looks good up. Feels it too; snug, cosy and quiet

32 seconds
But we came to feel the sun on our face… The roof drops in just 6.8sec, shifting that fastidiously manicured 50:50 weight distribution to 49:51…

7 minutes
Cockpit, being strictly two-seat, is cosier than a 911 or Conti GT's. Shift paddles could be nicer to hold and to use

59 minutes
Must we give it back? Another Alpine pass perhaps, and ignore the missed calls

PLUS

Engine; steering; traction; beauty; noise; badge

MINUS

Cockpit is a huge improvement but Bentley still leads here

All the digital and
all the physical.
Everyone's happy

The rhythm all this chassis and powertrain talent lets you to settle into is magical

reading. Because we already know the least big Aston is a great sports car, and so's this Roadster – mostly because it's essentially the same car. The suspension set-up (Bilstein adaptive dampers) and electronics calibration are identical, with slightly softer transmission mounts the only meaningful deviation. Weight is up, of course (by 60kg), as is price (by circa £10k to £175k), and the folding roof steals some boot space (down from 346 litres to 200 litres). But Aston's new soft-top is every bit as focused, fizzy and frenetic as its tin-top sibling, and undoubtedly a richer sensory experience.

I catch myself mentally listing the changes versus the previous Vantage as we climb again. The steering wheel, perfectly sized and shaped to work with the pretty direct rack (2.27 turns lock-to-lock, down from 2.4 previously) is the first bit of great news. The last thing the old Vantage needed was to be any wider, and though this one is it doesn't feel it. It's a breeze to place and the taut steering, which offers a modicum of feel (plus a little hunting on cambered surfaces at lower speeds), plugs you into a chassis so cohesive and confidence-inspiring it can be hard to believe such small changes (stiffer rear damper mounts, stronger upper front wishbones and a shorter final drive ratio) have so completely transformed the car's dynamic character.

Slaloming through a wicked section of curves, the drying tarmac giving us more grip to work with, the sensation is more like skiing than driving, this short, broad and low tool of a car pivoting around you more like a big Elise than a 1665kg (dry) roadster with a 4.0-litre V8 in the nose. The brake pedal is firm and accurate, with plenty of fade-free power to dig into, and the ZF auto 'box does a passable impression of a twin-clutcher, with quick shifts and a satisfying action. The ride, though untroubled in Austria by any properly gnarly tarmac, is composed and compliant, encouraging you to experiment with the firmer damper settings (mostly better the stiffer you go) in a way so many cars with adaptive dampers just don't. And the rhythm all this chassis and powertrain talent lets you to settle into is magical, the Vantage Roadster rotating keenly into hairpins and sweepers alike with its grippy front-axle grip (particularly once the bespoke Michelins have a little heat in them). Traction on corner exit is strong, too, helped by the sweetly calibrated throttle pedal, e-diff and multi-stage traction control, which together give you the confidence to work right up to the limit, corner after corner, mile after glorious mile.

The Stroll-era Aston F1 team is a work in progress. Its Vantage Roadster is the finished article.

BEN MILLER

First verdict

A beautiful, ballistic and balletic roadster. Might be top of its class. The new Vantage to have – or at least to covet
★★★★★

Data	PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
	£175,000	3998cc 32v twin-turbocharged V8, eight-speed automatic, rear-wheel drive	656bhp @ 6000rpm, 590lb ft @ 2750rpm, 3.5sec 0-62mph, 202mph	1665kg (dry)	23.0mpg, 279g/km CO2	Now

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We doubt you'll be disappointed by the cabin, but it doesn't feel like progress

Note the faster angle of tailgate: good for posing, less so for practicality

AUDI A6 AVANT

Avantage, Audi

The new A6 estate is a reminder that there are still plenty of alternatives if you don't want to go for an SUV or an EV

Are you keeping up? Audi has a new plan. Another one. It now offers the A6 in combustion as well as EV flavours, mirroring rival BMW's approach with the 5-series and i5.

Using hardware related to the oily bits in the latest Audi Q5, the new A6 is the most aero-efficient wagon Ingolstadt's ever made, with a drag coefficient of just 0.25, in the spirit of the slippery 100 Avant of 1977.

For now, your engine choice is petrol or diesel 2.0-litre fours. The 2.0 TFSI develops 201bhp and 251lb ft of torque, sent through the front wheels only for 0-62mph in 8.3sec and 149mph flat-out. Spend £4k or so extra and you'll secure the 2.0 TDI with all-wheel drive. The diesel engine produces 201bhp and 295lb ft, with an additional 24bhp and 170lb ft from the MHEV Plus mild hybrid 48-volt system, which allows electric-only running at low speeds. Top speed is 148mph, and 0-62mph takes 7.0sec.

This is a grown-up estate and it feels large on the road, although once you head out of town that size dissolves around you somewhat. (Higher-spec models gain four-wheel steering, which makes the Avant feel remarkably nimble during fast changes of direction and around town.)

Most A6s come with passive dampers as standard, though air springs are available as an option. Driving both system back to back helps you grasp the difference. If you can afford the air, it brings even greater isolation from poor road surfaces – but steel-sprung models are pretty good too. You're well protected from the clatter of combustion and roar of road.

Decent as both these engines are, it's interesting to get a drive in a version not available in the UK, a creamy smooth 3.0-litre V6 petrol making 362bhp and 406lb ft. It's cultured and just a little bit burbly – but then again, we recorded slightly worse than 25mpg on our test drive. The V6-engined S6 and V8 RS6 waiting in the wings will provide more fizz.

Lots of screens, not all entirely necessary

Audi has long outclassed most rivals with top-drawer cabins. We doubt you'll climb onboard the new A6 and be disappointed, but it doesn't feel like progress. The technology is staggering, but we question why it uses cheap, shiny piano black trim everywhere across the centre console, the main touchpoints of the steering wheel and the annoying – flimsy even – panel on the driver's door that controls lights, locks, mirrors and seat memory. The trim gets fingerprinty and doesn't have the heft and class of the materials used on earlier Audis.

Boot space is decent. Audi has raked the bootlid by a few extra degrees compared with the previous version, to the detriment of loadbay space. At 503 litres (slightly less for the mild hybrid), it's noticeably smaller than the BMW 5-series Touring (570 litres) or Mercedes E-Class Estate (615 litres).

On many levels it's a class act. We like the way it looks, it's a slick, sophisticated drive and it's beautifully assembled. It's just a shame the interior is a little over-fussy and not quite as knock-out as Audi cabins of yesteryear.

TIM POLLARD

First verdict

Audi realises not everyone wants to plug in – and builds a cracking combustion estate car, just like the old days

★★★★☆

THE FIRST HOUR

3 minutes
Touchscreens dominate the cabin: infotainment logic happily easy to learn

7 minutes
Don't bother with the *third* touchscreen in front of the passenger... overkill!

22 minutes
Petrol 2.0 a smooth operator; we're averaging 34mpg

41 minutes
Loving the storage solutions: lashing devices clip into beautifully engineered boot rails

59 minutes
Electro sunroof changes opacity at touch of a button, with nine phases

PLUS

Impressive build quality; slick to drive; a well-executed executive estate

MINUS

Piano black trim overkill; boot smaller than rivals'

Data

PRICE	POWERTRAIN	PERFORMANCE	WEIGHT	EFFICIENCY	ON SALE
£53,285 (TFSI Sport)	1984cc 16v four-cyl, seven-speed dual-clutch auto, front-wheel drive	201bhp @ 4300rpm, 251lb ft @ 2000rpm, 8.3sec 0-62mph, 149mph	1790kg	35.3-39.8mpg, 161-181g/km CO2	Now

Opinion

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Letter of the month

Swede dreams

I was intrigued by your article on the Volvo ES90 in Agenda, May.

In 1987 we had the choice of a Volvo estate or a Saab 9000 Turbo hatchback. We chose the Saab and had a series of such cars until Saab switched from hatchbacks to estates.

A sad day. The 9000 hatchbacks were brilliant and served our family of five plus a dog for many years.

I cannot help thinking that the ES90 has an almost identical body concept to our Saab.

Is this a Swedish full circle?

Ron Nailer

Tall tales

Well done to Big G, as he was known in the office (Georg Kacher's reminiscences, May issue). He was a gangly youth fresh from Inverness University with an accent not dissimilar to mine, as he was born in Graz, Austria, not that far from Budapest in Hungary. It was quite a cosmopolitan office at *CAR* in the '70s: Mel Nichols comes from Tasmania and Ian Fraser from Melbourne. In addition to Georg we were very lucky to have the legendary LJK Setright and George Bishop among our great writers.

The fire Georg mentioned was spotted by art director Mike Ellis, who saw the reflection from across the road. Little Britain, EC1, was a very narrow street.

The ground floor was on fire but luckily Fraser, Ellis and Nichols were able to leave via the fire escape. Nichols kicked it shut as he was the last to leave and this saved all the manuscripts and transparencies. Otherwise it would have been the end of FF Publishing.

I am just happy that the same very high editorial standards which were the hallmark of FF are still very much ingrained in the current *CAR* team.

So happy 50th, Georg, and thanks for making the long journey to *CAR* from Graz via Inverness.

Andrew Frankl

A real 'sliding doors' moment. If Georg had turned up while everyone was out, or if there had been no fire, or if Inverness Zoo had made him a better offer… Zoology's loss; our gain. CO

Agenda fluidity

First of all, I wanted to say how much I am enjoying the rejigged first section of the magazine. Given day-to-day life is hectic and I have the attention span of a goldfish, I can't really keep up with automotive news and trends on the internet. The Agenda articles do a really good job at filling in the gaps for me.

Secondly, as a Dacia fanatic, I was about to take my pitchfork out after reading the Bigster review in the May issue and seeing you awarded it three stars out of five. While I don't agree with the criticism about it not having seven seats (the Jogger does that fine for Dacia), I do see the point you are making about the MG HS having more equipment for the same price. If I were on the hunt for a cheap new family car, I would find it very hard to look beyond the value for money, even as a massive Dacia fan.

Furthermore, having owned and enjoyed a Skoda Karoq for the last three years, I am not 100 per cent sure I will convert my support for Dacia into actually buying one as our next car.

Not the existential crisis I was expecting to have on a Saturday, but hey ho!

Mihai Hrecinuc

Bigster-related fisticuffs averted, just

Living his best life

I feel rather for sorry for Liam Anderson (Letters, May) who says he doesn't 'get' cars without roofs. At 18 I had a 1953 Lotus 6 with a TR2 engine and just a flyscreen. It was noisy, uncomfortable, wet, windy and absolutely bloody joyous in the right weather. A four-wheeled motorbike if ever there was one.

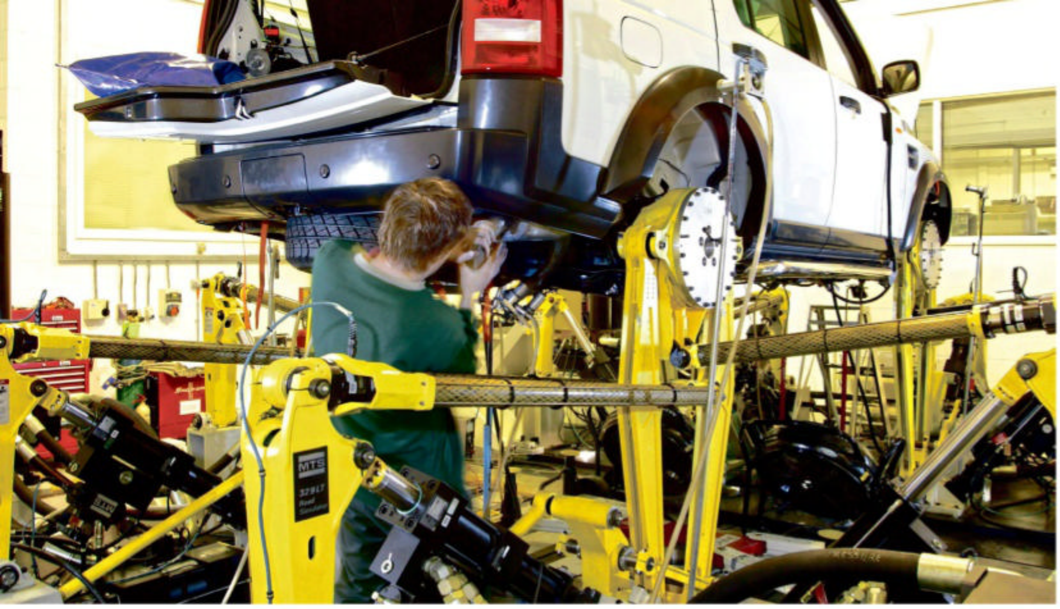
I followed that with a 1967 Jaguar E-Type 4.2. A fabulous car to drive and look at but not the same feeling as I had with the Lotus. Then I went convertible again with a 1978 TVR and rediscovered the joy. That car became the deposit for my first house and, many boring family cars later, I have recently, at the age of 70, recreated my youth with a Honda S2000 convertible.

I really don't mind if Liam thinks I look like a pillock. I'm enjoying my life and not worrying what others may think.

Andrew Kelsey

The bitterest pillock

I felt a little sad reading Mr Anderson's confession that he was unable to understand the joy of open-top



Not actually a picture of Gavin Green building a Discovery

cars. The best demonstration of the feeling would be to observe what a large dog on the back seat of a car does as it picks up speed: sticks its head out of the window and relishes the joy of motion and fresh air.

I felt even sadder when I read that he thinks that a driver of an open-top car 'looks like a pillock'. Imagine believing that total strangers care one jot about his opinion.

I do hope that things pick up a bit for Mr Anderson.

Nick Burnham

Soft in the head

The comments regarding choice of soft or hardtop posted last month by a writer who admits to 'having driven a Mazda MX-5 once' fly in the face of the thousands of owners here and overseas who choose to buy MX-5s as one of the only affordable soft-top sports cars, and which is rated number four in your Coupes and Cabrios section in GBU.

I'm now I my twentieth year of MX-5 ownership and have had both versions but contrary to the comments made in the letter, the hardtop does not solve the problems suggested regarding noise, air-con, and audio. With the hardtop down in the RF version the wind noise is in fact considerable.

Air-con and audio can both be adjusted and work fine in the soft-top. The RF version is also a heavier car.

Bob Hull

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Relativity

It sounds like the Alfa Romeo Junior has a lot going for it (Italian drive feature, May issue) but Alfa should resist boasting about its weight. It is around 50 per cent heavier than the slightly bigger Suzuki Vitara.

David Coombs

Discovery channelled

Gavin Green's column about the Land Rover Discovery (May) was spot-on. I had one for years and it carried my dogs and me across the mud, crossed Europe many times, and, as GG says, it did what it says on the tin. I have friends in Munich and Zurich who have houses in the mountains, who bought them and loved them.

None of us liked the look of the Disco 5. But in 2014 I bought a Range Rover Sport, and I continue to enjoy it today.

John Wallinger

Nearly affordable

In response to Danyel Mills' letter in the May issue, the simple way to avoid depreciation is buying nearly new. My Skoda Enyaq vRS was just six months old when I bought it, yes almost £20k off the original price (their hit not mine), and now coming up to a year later based on my purchase price I'm down just £3k.

You want a new car then take it on the chin, otherwise buy wisely.

Tom Baker

car

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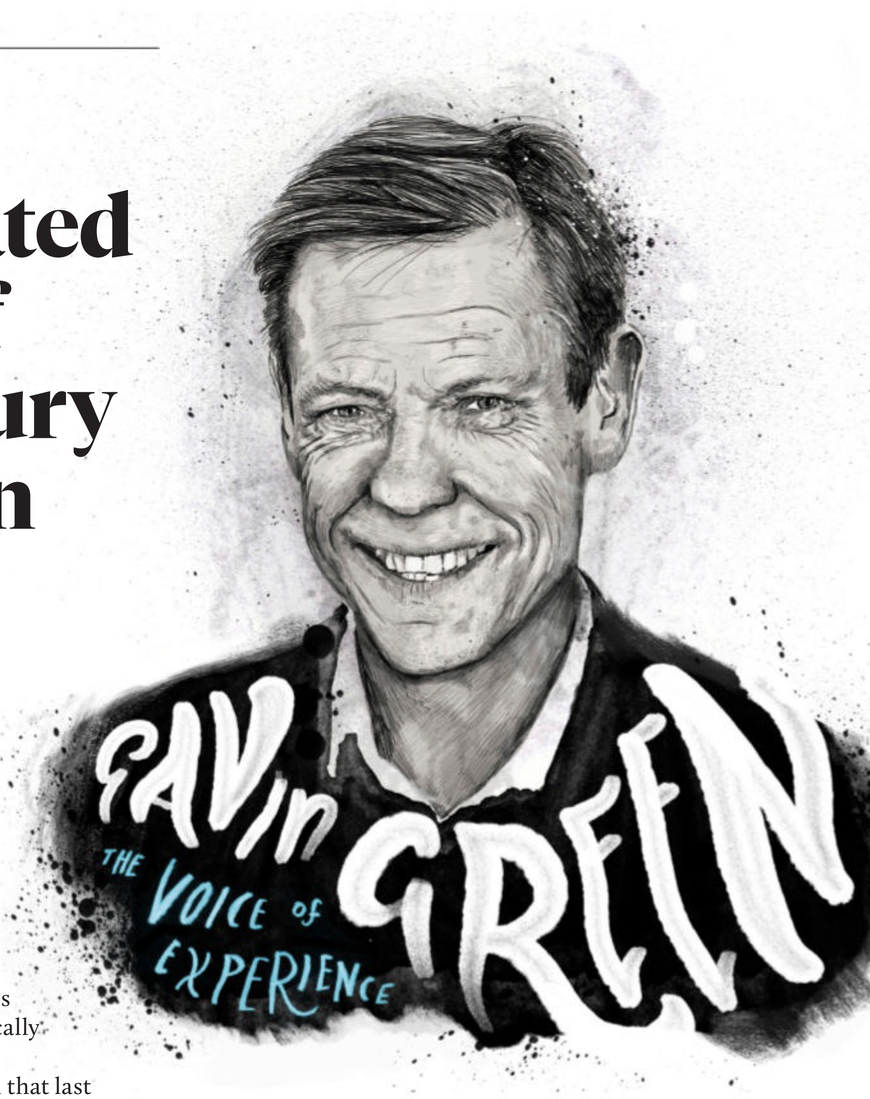
‘The most underestimated British car of the 21st century is enjoying an unexpected burst of life’



It’s always good to see a much-underrated car get a new lease of life. It’s also very rare. What’s more, the latest version is surely the most technologically advanced car ever made.

Regular readers will recall that last month I was wowed by the Waymo driverless Jaguar i-Pace in Los Angeles. It was probably the most astonishing drive of my life, driven expertly by an AI algorithm.

Now comes news that Waymo, part of Google’s parent company Alphabet, will convert more than 2000 new i-Paces to robotaxi spec in a newly opened plant in Mesa, Arizona. It will be the first Jaguar to be assembled in America, in a joint venture with Magna – which built the i-Pace in Austria until production finished there at the end of last year.

With the latest Waymo driverless tech – lidar, radar, cameras and AI of astonishing ingenuity – the electric Jaguar will surely be the most technologically advanced car ever built. It’s a worthy final chapter in the story of the most impressive Jaguar of the 21st century (at least so far).

It was also Europe’s first premium EV, the UK’s first modern EV, the world’s best-driving EV (until the Porsche Taycan stole its crown), the boldest and most brilliant in design, and a car that was sadly neglected by Jaguar itself soon after launch. And so the undernourished i-Pace began to lag in software and in range. There were well documented electrical gremlins, too.

JLR halted meaningful technical development when it decided to reimagine the Jaguar brand into something new: more visually arresting, more exclusive, and more expensive (the all-new cars arrive in 2026).

The irony is that a Jaguar, in the form of the Waymo-modified i-Pace, is already the most eye-catching ‘wow’ car in Southern California, world capital of car culture. It is the car that’s most talked-about by the young and most respected by technophiles, and it’s the car most social media influencers want to be seen in.

This is precisely the scenario ‘reimagined’ Jaguar wants from its upcoming new EV streamliner, as previewed late last year.

So, forget brightly hued Lamborghinis, scarlet red Ferraris, classic Porsches, immaculate old pink Cadillac convertibles, big-foot black stealth SUVs or the newest Rivian EV. The ‘It’ car of LA is already a Jaguar.

Not since the E-Type first ventured down Ocean Avenue 60-odd years ago, sleek and low and otherworldly, has a Jaguar created such interest in America’s wealthiest car market.

So rather than glide gracefully into retirement, ‘old’ Jaguar has had a new and unexpected burst of life, like Mick Jagger jumping around in his black Nike Air Max trainers. There are 100 of these autonomous-driving Jaguars criss-crossing LA. They’re in San Francisco, Phoenix and in Austin, Texas too.

When the i-Pace – the original version that needed a driver – was launched in 2018, with its cab-forward stance and voluminous cabin, it was the first EV properly to exploit the inherent packaging advantages of electric cars. It threw off the shackles of old-school petrol-car design thinking, creating a new type of Jaguar that previewed the advantages of a new type of powertrain – and made it very passenger friendly, in ways that are only now, via Waymo, being fully realised. Ian Callum says it’s his best work as design boss of Jaguar and I agree: handsome, eye catching and intelligent.

It’s true it was not a commercial success. But few EVs at the time were. Then Jaguar gave up on it, as it totally reinvented its future. Newer rivals overtook the i-Pace technically, although none looked more avant-garde and few drove better. Then Waymo, seeing potential that Jaguar had not, reimagined it.

Former *CAR* editor Gavin Green is now one of the world’s foremost automotive commentators, with a keen eye for the bigger picture

Peter Strain

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The Pirelli Cinturato P7 fits a wide range of rim widths for classic Porsches. The tables below demonstrate the rim widths that the ETRTO suggest tyres will perform at their best on; However there are 'outlaws' out there, who choose a different route; Like this car with a 225/50R15 P7 stretched onto a 9" rim on the front, while the 285/40R15 P7 sits comfortably on an 11" rim on the rear.

PIRELLI CINTURATO™

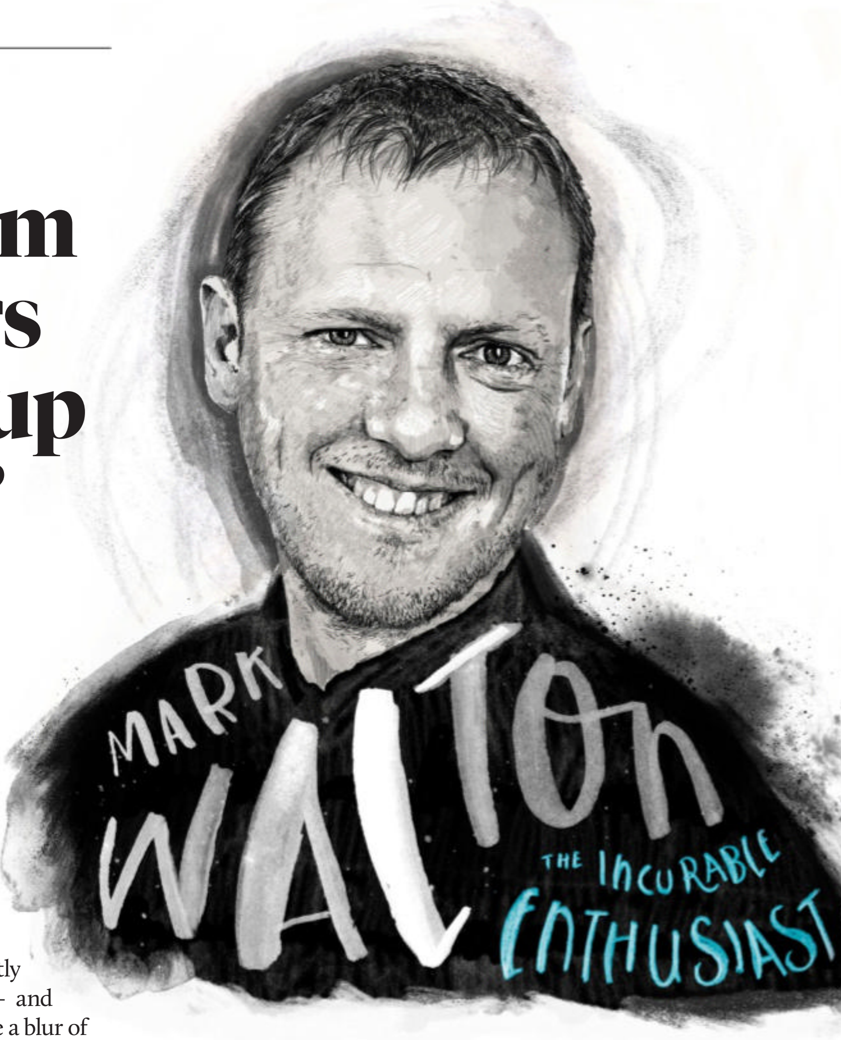
15" Pirelli Cinturato P7

Tyre Size	Section Width	Overall Diameter	Recommended rim width
205/50 R 15	210 mm / 8.27"	585 mm / 23.03"	5.5" - 7.5"
225/50 R 15	229 mm / 9.01"	608 mm / 23.94"	6.0" - 8.0"
285/40 R 15	288 mm / 11.33"	609 mm / 23.98"	9.5" - 11"
345/35 R 15	350 mm / 13.78"	628 mm / 24.72"	11" - 13"

16" Pirelli Cinturato P7

Tyre Size	Section Width	Overall Diameter	Recommended rim width
205/55 R16	214 mm / 8.42"	631 mm / 24.84"	5.5" - 7.5"
225/50 R16	230 mm / 9.05"	633 mm / 24.92"	6" - 8"
245/45 R16	253 mm / 9.96"	634 mm / 24.96"	7.5" - 9.5"

‘I’m not sure the mainstream manufacturers can summon up a “functional” state of mind any more’



As I’ve mentioned before, I grew up on a steady diet of French family cars. My dad was a fan of small Renault hatchbacks – mostly high-mileage, secondhand dross – and my memories of going to school are a blur of plastic seats, spindly two-spoke steering wheels and gearlevers in strange places.

So I was excited to drive the new Renault 5, a car that’s garnered so much praise over the last few months. Was it wrong to expect some kind of Renault personality to shine through? In our modern, homogenised, platform-sharing world of synthetic, lookalike electric cars, devoid of all character and designed by committee to some bland, middle-of-the-road Euro-standard?

In fact, it’s not bad. It looks cheeky on the outside and on the inside the combination of squishy seats, a gear selector mounted on the steering column and some fuchsia pink graphics feels quirky and French. On the move, the new 5 is big and heavy, of course, and it has that oddly remote, featureless electric drive that all EVs share, but the steering is sharp and it feels lively.

So I start to like it for a few minutes… but then the same intrusive thought keeps niggling my brain, getting in the way. It’s the price. The new Renault 5 starts at £23k for the base version and quickly climbs to £30k, if you upgrade with a couple of options. Now, I know we’re all supposed to accept today’s high prices and move along, nothing to see here, but 30 GRAND FOR A SUPERMINI? To me, this isn’t just about affordability, it’s about essence. Or – seeing as we’re talking French cars – it’s about philosophy. ‘Ce n’est pas en donnant la vie, mais en risquant la vie, que l’homme s’élève au-dessus de l’animal,’ as French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir put it. Was she talking about the economics of building cars in Europe? I don’t know, I found that quote on Google and I don’t speak a word of French.

Back to the Renault. You see, the philosophy of cheap cars isn’t just about the price, it’s about minimalism, about functionality. ‘To be modern is not a fashion, it is a state of mind,’ said Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, successful designer of ugly tower blocks that people now want to pull down. The superminis that I grew up with were also a state of mind, and even today I can’t help myself – I sit in a supposedly ‘affordable’ car like the new 5 and I start deleting features. Electric seats? Out. Air conditioning? Gone. Touchscreens? Unnecessary. Those irritating, digital eco-drive monitors that tell you how you should drive to ‘save the planet’ (in your expensive, lithium-powered plastic cocoon)? Burn them on a fire with some old tyres!!

Eventually you delete and delete until you get to the Dacia Spring, which is £15k and the cheapest EV you can buy in the UK. And yet even the Spring doesn’t feel right, isn’t Corbusian enough, compared to the stripped-back, minimalist hatchbacks of my youth.

You see, I’m not sure the mainstream manufacturers can even summon up this ‘functional’ state of mind any more. I think it died out with the Renault Fuego in 1980. But not long after I’d driven the new 5, news came of Slate Auto, the US start-up backed by Amazon gazillionaire Jeff Bezos. What fascinates me about the Slate pick-up isn’t the truck itself, it’s the philosophy behind it. For years we’ve been told that EVs mean fewer moving parts and less complex drivetrains, yet the models we’re served up are like the Mercedes EQB – complex, expensive SUVs with massage seats and head-up displays.

The Slate pick-up, in contrast, is sold as being ‘radically simple’. Built in an old printing plant in Indiana with no expensive paint shop, the body panels are made using a one-colour, injection-moulded polypropylene composite. And instead of offering 20 trim levels, Slate will make just one vehicle in a single spec – a spec that includes no touchscreens or audio or speakers – just a phone mount.

You can reserve a Slate pick-up for just $50 and after Federal incentives the price is $20k. The pick-up is to America what the supermini is to Europe – one day, someone is going to properly re-invent the Renault 5, the Mini and the Fiat Panda. And a whole new generation of drivers will fall in love with rubber mats and wind-up windows.

Editor-at-large Mark Walton hasn’t been the same since he got back to basics by running a Renault Clio long-term test car last year

Peter Strain

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Fun

factory

How can we identify 2025's best hot hatch? By spending three days in 10 cars on some of northern England's most glorious roads and a racetrack

Words Ben Barry, CJ Hubbard, Piers Ward & Ted Welford
Photography Lee Brimble

What price progress?

Alpine, Abarth, Alfa and Mini have decades of experience in making affordable performance cars. Does that know-how translate to EVs?

ALPINE
Y25 XZC
RX74 GGE
RX74

Turning heritage cues up to 11 makes these EVs stand out from the crowd

In just a few years we've gone from worrying that electric cars would be the death of driving to an e-powered pursuit of hot-hatch glory. These four cars are bang up to date in their hardware and software, but also highlight a developing response to a wider EV issue. Faced with a blizzard of new and tech-forward cars, European marques are turning to one thing they have in abundance that start-up rivals lack: heritage.

These four aren't the only EVs in this test, but we've grouped them together because they're clearly trying to do the same thing: leveraging an icon tied to past success.

The electric John Cooper Works from Mini represents not only the man but also the Works tuning schtick Mini has leaned on for two decades now. JCWs are typically raucous, so won't e-power seem oddly quiet? For the equally strident brand named after Carlo Abarth, can the 600e compact SUV succeed where the smaller 500e stuttered?

In redeploying two storied badges, is it a travesty that Alfa has also taken the compact SUV route? And coming after the purity and lightness of the A110, are the Renault 5-based Alpine A290's cartoonish details and big-wheeled stance – it stands 15mm taller than the Veloce – a fitting celebration of Jean Rédélé's legacy?

We're not dinosaurs. In fact we're very open minded about the prospects of these cars doing well in this test, having had plenty of good experiences with driver-focused EVs, but this positive approach is tinged with a nervous apprehension that they'll struggle to meet the expectations that come from labelling any car a hot hatch.

'That has got to be one of the worst cars I've ever driven.' Ben Barry's scathing initial response to the Abarth gets us off to a challenging start, bringing with it visions of

And it's off: hitting the OV button energises the A290

looming diplodocus and circling pterodactyls. This Acid Green 277bhp limited-edition Scorpionissima is the most powerful Abarth road car ever – can it really be as bad as that? Ben takes particular umbrage ▶ with the steering telling him 'nothing', the inconsistent brake feel (thanks, regen) and the 'confused', overly tough ride.

The platform-sharing Alfa matches the Abarth for output and both feature stiffer suspension, with a 25mm ride-height reduction versus their lesser siblings. The outcome is different, as the marginally slower Junior is appreciably more pliant, immediately feeling easier to live with. But it too lacks steering feel, properly poised body control and braking consistency.

A curious division between Alcon (Abarth) and Brembo (Alfa) has delivered very similar 380mm front brakes that both manage to rob you of confidence in the default driving setting. Meanwhile the torsion-beam rear axle clearly isn't helping these cars keep their contact patches together – the confusion Ben speaks of is the disjointed reaction you get from each corner whenever the surface starts to ripple.

As instant turn-offs go, however, no car in this entire test can match the electric JCW, which has ride quality only an industrial stamping machine could love. It is incredibly firm. And this is the more modern of the two Mini platforms present? 'The Minis are the only cars that made me physically wince,' says Piers Ward.

The upside is a low-slung incisiveness that a taller car will always struggle to deliver. The Mini is by far the most ground-hugging of the electric contenders – including the Hyundai you'll meet in the next story along, which overshadows these lesser e-hatches in more ways than one – and Ben is cautiously positive about the Mini's steering. Shame the steering wheel is a horribly fat German-sausage affair. And at 1680kg, the eJCW is the heaviest of this foursome.

Still, it's quick enough, with 0-62mph in 5.9sec, and an official range of 226 miles. That's the best of this bunch. In all four cases, once you put the hammer down the efficiency drops substantially. That none can charge faster than 100kW puts another dent in their playful partner status. We're all over range anxiety, right? Not so much when you're in the middle of the Yorkshire Dales and even Zap-Map is shrugging.

But there's a more fundamental problem with electric power in hot-hatch land: single-speed transmissions and that void where the under-bonnet personality ought to be mean they simply don't give you enough interaction. There's not a single regen paddle between these four rivals, nor the lovingly coded eight-speed gearbox simulator that's such a joy in the 5 N. The Italian duo in particular are far too one dimensional, unless you're happy turning B mode on and off via centre-console switchgear.

The Mini does have a Boost function, activated by a paddle on what would usually be the downshift side. All this does is make the full 255bhp available for 10 seconds if you flatten the accelerator; it's otherwise limited to 228bhp. You'll be more distracted by the garish countdown timer that covers the head-up display AND the circular infotainment screen (hiding the nav directions in the process) than blown away by sudden extra urgency. Uh-oh… is that a T-Rex?

Alpine has tried harder. While the A290's steering wheel is another over-stuffed, under-round ugly sucker to cling to, it also sports a couple of less conventional protrusions. The rotary dial that controls three levels of regen is more pretend-racing-driver

No, CJ doesn't have tiny hands, but they're no match for the Mini's chunky wheel

theatre than ergonomic success, but the slightly cheap-feeling red lever marked OV has innovative merit.

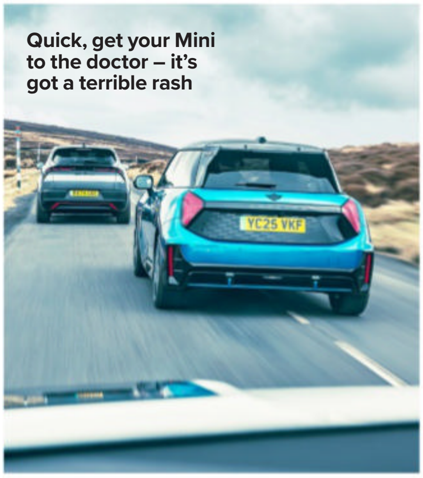
Falling under your right thumb, it's an overtake button. Not a new concept in itself, but Alpine has gone all-in on the key advantage e-power has over combustion and uses it to instantly activate the full performance of the A290's motor. No preamble, no need to flex your right foot – as long as you're under power, if you hit this switch the car will give it all until you release it again. *Fast & Furious* nitrous fantasies come true.

Well, sort of. This top-spec A290 GTS musters only 215bhp, so it's not going to catapult you into next week. But the immediate and sustained kick is enough to get you giggling and at least adds some cartoonish drama to proceedings. Yes, it's like having two accelerators, but OV hits differently as you don't even have to transition through the pedal travel to reach peak output. Click, and the car is sprinting.

Alpine's streak continues with the suspension, where the multi-link rear does a better job of soaking up bumps without punishing your life choices. It's still rather jittery, though, and things begin to go awry with the seating position – it feels more akin to the SUVs than the Mini.

Worst of all, the steering feel is awful. It's especially bad just off centre, with a greasy, sproingy sensation to the initial input at the exact moment you want reassurance. But ▶

Front fogs add drama to the Alpine's styling



Quick, get your Mini to the doctor – it's got a terrible rash

THE NUMBERS

MINI ELECTRIC JCW

There's never been a dud Mini hot hatch **PRICE** £38,420 **POWERTRAIN** 49kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 255bhp, 258lb ft, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 124mph **WEIGHT** 1680kg **EFFICIENCY** 4.0 miles per kWh (official), 3.0 miles per kWh (tested), 226-mile range (official), 147-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2

ALPINE A290 GTS

The R5's appeal but with more power **PRICE** £37,500 **POWERTRAIN** 52kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 215bhp, 221lb ft, 6.4sec 0-62mph, 106mph **WEIGHT** 1483kg **EFFICIENCY** 3.7 miles per kWh (official), 2.8 miles per kWh (tested), 224-mile range (official), 145-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2

ABARTH 600E SCORPIONISSIMA

600e is the most powerful Abarth ever **PRICE** £39,875 **POWERTRAIN** 51kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 277bhp, 254lb ft, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 124mph **WEIGHT** 1640kg **EFFICIENCY** 3.3 miles per kWh (official), 2.7 miles per kWh (tested), 207-mile range (official), 137-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2

ALFA ROMEO JUNIOR VELOCE

Risky brand move but slippy diff boosts it **PRICE** £42,295 **POWERTRAIN** 51kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 277bhp, 254lb ft, 6.0sec 0-62mph, 124mph **WEIGHT** 1560kg **EFFICIENCY** 3.3 miles per kWh (official), 2.7 miles per kWh (tested), 207-mile range (official), 137-mile range (tested), 0g/km CO2

YC25 VKF
RX74 GFE

Moorland roads expose the limits of their ride quality

the whole set-up is overly light and devoid of useful feedback. It makes the entire car seem like a swing and a miss. Oh dear.

That's four electric hot hatches, each with at least one fundamental flaw. How do we pick a winner, let alone consider putting one through to the on-track decider at Croft?

Persevering with the Italian pair, my less exacting take is that Ben Barry is being a touch harsh. Adjust your expectations in line with their elevated centre of gravity, and both can keenly carry cross-county speed. Push harder and the proper mechanical Torsen LSD used by both makes its presence felt in the way they haul themselves through tight and twisting corners. There's still not much feedback, but there is conviction. I could live with it.

Set the driving mode to most aggressive – Scorpion Track in the Abarth, Dynamic in the Alfa – and this knocks out the regen completely, allowing you to lean exclusively on those friction brakes. The pedals are still oddly soft, and it's better to press on with B mode also engaged, but you can make very rapid progress. The 600e is the harder and sharper – the Junior is a little too laid-back in this company – so gets the nod if you want a hot crossover and can put up with its annoyances. These include Abarth's artificial engine noise, which sounds like a busted wheel bearing at higher constant speeds. You'll disable it.

Abarth wheels lean into scorpion design theme

The whole car snaps into focus. Now there's no dead spot, no vagueness, just tenacity, darting deftness and go, go, go

The Alpine's steering is such a bummer – though we're not much taken with the fussy styling either. And while the ride is softer than the Mini's it's still pattery and unsettled. These issues reflect the A290's biggest problem: Renault's done such an excellent job of the regular 5 that this seems too much like one of those rolled-in-glue, then Halfords, then glitter cars. OV button aside, it's not elevated enough over the much more crisply executed ordinary car to wow us.

That leaves the Mini. Every single time the other tester gets out, they complain again about the ride. But no one is knocking the steering or the brakes. And then I find myself in hot pursuit of Ben and Piers in the Yaris and Golf on some deserted, sinuous roads, and the whole car snaps into focus. Ignoring the stupid Boost paddle entirely, it has the pace to keep up on the straights and the front end to do the same in the corners. There's no dead spot, no vagueness, just tenacity, darting deftness and go, go, go – and when you wind it up the thumping suspension fades away.

If you want the most fun from an affordable electric car, the eJCW is the answer. But if you want an actual hot hatch, you'll still need an actual engine. The Mini is quick, even thrilling, but it isn't as exciting as the best petrol-powered competition. None of these EVs is going through to the final.

CJ HUBBARD

Petrol vs electric

You can now buy your Mini JCW in two flavours. Which version is the better hot hatch, petrol or electric?

Nowhere is the great debate of the age more real than right here – and no, we're not talking about who's going to win *Love Island* this summer. Because in Mini world you have the choice of tradition or the future: stick with a petrol John Cooper Works or twist to the electric JCW. It's the only hot hatch available with such a clear choice, now that Abarth's combustion 595 has been summarily dismissed.

Though the two Minis might look similar at first, there are big differences once you dig deeper. Design-wise, the EV doesn't get the black wheelarch surrounds that have been a hallmark of the Mini since BMW took over the brand, nor the clamshell bonnet. As a result, the electric one lacks the coherence of the petrol, being slightly awkward and too upright at the front. It keeps reminding me of the Ora Funky Cat, now rebranded GWM Ora 03.

Perhaps that's no wonder when you look at the development of it. While the petrol keeps the same platform as its predecessor, the EV gets help from China and uses an all-new platform co-developed with Ora's parent Great Wall Motors. Built in Zhangjiagang rather than Cowley, the EV is a vivid example of the globalised, interconnected nature of the car industry.

But putting genealogy aside, which is the better car? Let's start with petrol, the core JCW. Keeping the previous version's turbocharged 2.0-litre unit, power remains the same at 228bhp, though torque has been bumped up to 280lb ft. Gone is the six-speed manual/eight-speed auto choice, replaced by a seven-speed dual-clutch transmission, depriving the combustion car of what had been a clear reason for choosing engine over EV. The eJCW's single motor puts out more power (254bhp) but less torque (251lb ft).

Both have the interior fundamentals nailed – low driving position and plenty of adjustment – and both have the feel that defines a Mini, with light and darty steering. Throw them into a corner and they will stick, helped by both being on decent tyres (Hankook for the EV and Continental for the combustion car), in a break from Mini's habit of using hopeless Nexens.

The EV feels more alert, and with the Boost mode activated you at least get a sense of some character, in this case via the medium of torque steer. It feels alive. There's a fake sports sound, which is no less authentic than the overly try-hard sounds piped into the petrol JCW.

The electric JCW would be the more fun car, but it's let down by one fundamental issue – its ride. To call it appalling is an understatement, as it constantly fidgets and bobbles along, and manages to make even smooth surfaces feel rough. It's truly unstuck on moorland roads.

The petrol car is by no means a magic carpet, feeling too stiff and poorly damped on these challenging roads. But its ride is easier to live with and it's cracking fun on these roads. It wins this in-house clash.

TED WELFORD

Combustion car is built in Oxfordshire, unlike the eJCW

Three's a crowd

The Honda Civic Type R and Audi RS3 have a long history in this sort of fight, but now the Hyundai Ioniq 5 N is trying to muscle in

They used to film the original *All Creatures Great and Small* round these parts, which is fitting given the hot hatches we're testing are so eclectic: the Honda Civic Type R combines a 326bhp 2.0-litre turbo punch with front-wheel drive, the Audi RS3 harnesses a 395bhp turbo five with all-wheel drive, while the Hyundai Ioniq 5 N powers all four wheels with two electric motors; it's the largest, heaviest and – with 641bhp – most potent here. Yet all slot in the 'great' creatures category, with prices over £50k.

Civic first. You drop down into gorgeously comfortable and supportive seats in Type R red, the steering wheel wrapped in grippy alcantara, a bulb of a manual gearshifter in cool metal a hand span away. Small infotainment screen, climate controls you could use while lapping Suzuka… this car was made for driving.

You're immediately struck by the precision and tactility: the detail of the steering, the viscous weighting of perfectly placed pedals and most definitely the crisp, mechanical shift of that gearlever.

The Honda is not perfect. Despite a limited-slip diff, the Michelin 4S tyres struggle to deploy the 310lb ft of torque effectively – I remember the previous model having a cleaner, more clinical feel, which is odd given the performance has barely changed.

Damping is also way too firm in R+ and Sport modes but at least in Comfort it settles with speed – the entire platform feels of a piece, nose-led more than adjustable, but elastic enough for such a focused machine.

Heading for the Dales, a superbike appears below the hoop of the Civic's rear wing as the road starts to flick from one high-speed loading to another. Go on then.

At speed the clarity of the Type R's steering response takes some getting used to. ▶

Audi's five-cylinder USP will be dying soon #sadface

No other car has the Civic's rear attitude

You point it and it simply follows, the usual latency of the front followed by the rear all but dialled out.

Biker drops back then reels me in on the straights, but the Civic feels stronger than 326bhp suggests. There's some lag, a vacuum-cleaner soundtrack, but also kick to the boost, plus huge speed. The limiting factor is the front end – under more determined power at least – as the road threads narrower and runs up to a windswept hilltop.

Meeting *CAR*'s CJ Hubbard and Ted Welford – both rugged and windswept in their own way – I swap into the RS3. It's a *very* different proposition. Recently updated with new alloys and a revised steering wheel with much needed drive-mode shortcut buttons, its mechanicals are unchanged. That means 2.5 litres, 395bhp and quattro that incorporates a 'torque splitter' for a more rear-biased experience on demand.

If anything the Audi feels even more compliant than I remember, easing over a road that bucks and dips through a tricky landscape. Initially the Audi's steering is excessively light, but at speed the vagueness of over-assistance gives way to fluency and directness. It dials out the noise but still lets you point it exactly where you fancy.

Fast-acting all-wheel drive provides a lovely hooked-up feel – accuracy from the front, drive from the rear, and that supple ride to smother everything in between. The Audi is also surprisingly keen to change direction, with a nice bite at the front and an accommodating yaw when you lift off.

Shame its engine lacks sparkle. With its five-cylinder USP it's tunefully throaty and far more cultured than the Civic, but there's lethargy in the lag, and it prefers to haul in the midrange rather than rev out. The dual-clutch gearbox also lacks urgency.

But if you want something easier to live with than the Civic, not to mention a proper all-weather point-to-point hero that'd leave it standing in the wet, well, this is the ticket.

After the Audi, the Hyundai seems to have been dropped into some kind of *Honey I Shrunk The Kids* remake, dwarfing everything around it.

Initial driving impressions are a little underwhelming. While it often rides perfectly well, the 5 N's chassis struggles on these tricky roads, as each wheel deflects over bumps that the Audi simply glosses over. The steering also has more of a synthetic, gloopy feel and lacks definition around top-dead centre, though it does pivot into corners really quite decisively.

Naturally, with 641bhp our Korean contender is also insatiably rapid, if in the one-dimensional EV tradition. Salvation comes in the form of the Hyundai's simulated engine and gearbox. If this sounds like everything analogue car enthusiasts might rail against, the execution is genius, unlocking a layer of interaction usually absent from EVs. The 'engine' burbles fruitily like a Subaru flat-four, helping contextualise the speed, while artificial gear ratios launch hard then knock the edge off the acceleration at speed. Imagine upshifting from fourth to fifth gear in a fast corner to calm a car down but also taking it flat. Like that.

It's revealing that an EV is way more engaging when it presents as petrol, and slightly odd that a simulation adds authenticity, but there's no arguing with the result.

Calming the delivery down also reveals a greater depth to this chassis and all-wheel drive, simply because you can dig into the poise more. If anything the combination of such a spritely front end with so much mass is limiting – through quick direction changes I sense a substantial pendulum effect lurking in the background. But it's a load of fun to hustle, a 'corner rascal' as Hyundai brilliantly pitches it.

Certainly versus the other – admittedly much more affordable – EVs tested on the preceding pages, the Hyundai is leagues ahead. But against the Audi RS3 and Civic Type R? Close but not quite.

BEN BARRY

Ahead on power and pace, but Ioniq lacks some magic

Even hot hatches can fill the width of the road up here

THE NUMBERS

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

The legend, the logo, and established as our benchmark hot hatch, the latest Civic Type R is as sharp as ever – but it's now over £50k

PRICE £51,905 **POWERTRAIN** 1996cc turbocharged four-cylinder, six-speed manual, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 326bhp @ 6500rpm, 310lb ft @ 2500rpm, 5.4sec 0-62mph, 171mph **WEIGHT** 1429kg **EFFICIENCY** 34mpg (official), 186g/km CO2

AUDI RS3 SPORTBACK CARBON VORSPRUNG

Facelifted and likely to be the last time we'll see the five-cylinder engine, ever – two things that guarantee its spot on this test

PRICE £70,925 **POWERTRAIN** 2480cc turbocharged five-cylinder, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, all-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 395bhp @ 5600rpm, 369lb ft @ 2250rpm, 3.8sec 0-62mph, 174mph **WEIGHT** 1565kg **EFFICIENCY** 30.1mpg (official), 213g/km CO2

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

Formidably accomplished 5 N has made sceptics realise that, if the engineers get involved, EVs can be interesting and a lot of fun

PRICE £65,010 **POWERTRAIN** 84kWh battery, twin e-motors, all-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 641bhp, 546lb ft, 3.4sec 0-62mph, 161mph **WEIGHT** 2235kg **EFFICIENCY** 2.93 miles per kWh (official), 278-mile range (official), 0g/km CO2

Heartland heroes

Latest versions of three relatively affordable petrol-fuelled favourites head to the moors

KY25 DFE
GX74 YZF

The road is narrow and switches from gloriously sighted sections to point-and-squirt bits. The misty weather is being very British and softens the edges of the hills around us; it's damp enough to mean a coat is needed, not so wet that the wipers need to be on all the time. Grip alternates between good and scrabbly, so every touch of the right pedal is an exercise in caution.

The Golf GTI Clubsport and Mini JCW pierce the gloom ahead and behind like a pair of Belisha beacons as their red paint disappears and then reappears around each corner. The Toyota GR Yaris I'm in is the middle man, each bend a glorious excuse to revel in yet more dancing between gearchange, steering and brake.

I can't remember a better drive in 25 years of doing this: attainable speed and attainable price in a right-sized package. There's no way my long-term-test BMW M5 would be any quicker along these roads.

The Mini and the Golf have gone down the more traditional route of plenty of power and front-wheel drive. With 228bhp from the turbo four, the Mini has the same output as the pre-facelift version but torque is up by a healthy 44lb ft to 280lb ft. The Golf on test is the Clubsport, so it gets the more powerful 296bhp, 295lb ft version of the EA888 2.0-litre engine, its outputs increased by tweaked boost pressures.

The Toyota is the outlier: facelifted like the other two (and again with more power than before, 19bhp in this case) but with four-wheel drive and a relatively tiny 1.6-litre three-cylinder engine, it looks brilliant. I love the subtle surprise of it, where you get glimpses of more aggressive details the longer you look at it.

Earlier, we were up on top of a soaked moor where you'd think the Mini's ▶

In the Mini and, to a lesser extent, the GR Yaris, you need to be on it the whole time to get the best out of them

slightly lower power and smaller footprint might help it compared to the Golf. But in truth the ride is so appallingly firm that it's not pleasant to drive – bouncing from bump to bump, it almost knocks the wind out of me a couple of times and I find myself wanting to load the back seats up with several body builders just to get some weight over the rear tyres.

Not that it isn't entirely without redeeming features. Mini's classic nose-led handling is very much in evidence (if only BMW wouldn't insist on killing the steering's delicacy by fitting such an overly padded steering wheel), and the car turns in sharply, darting from corner to corner like a spaniel on the scent. It's best if you lean it into a bend and get the front outer tyre working hard – that way it starts to pivot and gives the car more rotation.

This generation has lost the manual gearbox, which is a shame, but you can't deny the economics of it – no one buys manuals any more. Instead, it has a dual-clutch auto with paddles behind the steering wheel that bring a degree of interactivity, especially if it's in Go-Kart mode. Frustratingly, though, the gear indicator isn't within the head-up display so you have to glance across to the main instruments to get a read-out of what cog you're in – it's these little details that niggle in the Mini.

We pull into the car park at the bottom of the moor and some sheep glance idly across, reluctantly breaking from their task of surviving on this sodden hill. I don't envy them one bit. And soon after I jump into the Golf I find I'm not envying the Mini's next driver.

For starters, the Clubsport feels like it has actual springs and dampers fitted. This lends the car a degree of absorption that the Mini can't match – because the tyres are in contact with the tarmac more often, everything gets better, from grip to feel to the state of my spine. It's a more connected car so that even without its power advantage it'd still be quicker.

Like the Mini, there's no manual option, but the VW's gearbox has a slightly bigger torque cut when you pull a paddle, so the changes feel more interactive. I stick it straight into the Individual driving mode because it allows you to keep certain elements in the sportier trim (steering, drive, engine sound) while dialling the dampers back. If only the Mini had this adaptability.

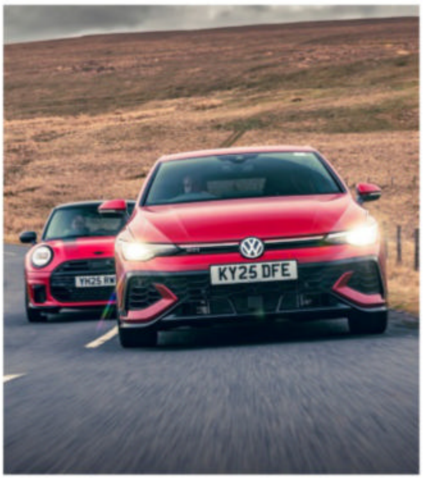
There's an electronic front differential that occasionally struggles to contain the torque in an uphill bend, but it's not as washy as in the Alpine or eJCW. Crucially, it doesn't annoy – you don't feel like you're fighting the car, even in these conditions. The GTI comes to you more naturally than the Mini and allows you to push or relax as you see fit. In the Mini, and to a lesser extent in the GR, you need to be on it the whole time to get the best out of them, but the Golf will drive with you, not against you.

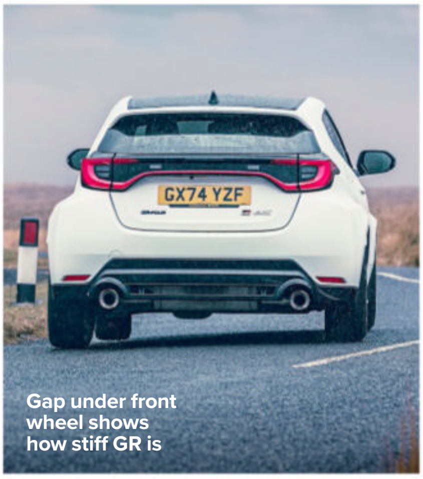
It can still be great fun. I pile into a downhill left, on the brakes into the apex, and the GTI gets up on its toes, weight heading towards the nose and giving it grip, rear dancing to follow. It's a lovely sensation and is the exact moment I know this is one of the cars that needs to go through to the final. That sort of delicacy is hard to ignore.

But what of the GR Yaris? Lower-set seats in this facelift, still slightly plasticky dash but, oh yes, also still a manual gearbox. And it gets even better, as your feet plunge into the footwell and you realise the brake and accelerator pedals are perfect for a spot of heel and toe.

My drive in the Toyota affirms everything that's great not only about the GR Yaris but also about this class of car, how it has the potential to transport you to a higher plane.

Rare sight: single pipe, centrally positioned





Gap under front wheel shows how stiff GR is

GR Yaris the most adjustable of our three

It's automotive nirvana – the blissful state of enjoying a drive just for the sake of it, with no destination in mind.

You use every control in the GR to make every part of the car react, with the result that it all feels more interactive. With the short-throw gearshift (a little bit notchy but robust enough to be rapidly thrown across the gate) allied to the thin steering wheel, you can balance it so well on the accelerator and use that power to get the car rotating as you'd want it, Track mode engaged and the diffs doing their thing.

We sweep through a fast left at one point, the GR leaning into the bend more than you'd perhaps expect, but the squish and roll give you the confidence to get on the power early, letting the new torque split send all the 288lb ft rearwards. The seating position is better in the Golf, but the VW can't match the Yaris's steering delicacy because the front tyres in the Toyota aren't doing quite so much heavy lifting.

It's a glorious drive as we plunge off the moor and into the valley. The Golf leads but it's the Toyota that wins the test: we need to count our blessings that this sort of car still exists, after legislators seem hell-bent on killing it off one way or another.

If they succeed, it'll be nothing short of a crime against engineering.

PIERS WARD

THE NUMBERS

MINI JOHN COOPER WORKS

The JCW badge is splurged across all sorts of Minis these days, but this one is the heartland, with the closest lineage to the original

PRICE £35,800 **POWERTRAIN** 1998cc turbocharged four-cylinder, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 226bhp @ 5000rpm, 280lb ft @ 1500rpm, 6.1sec 0-62mph, 155mph **WEIGHT** 1330kg **EFFICIENCY** 41.5mpg (official), 154g/km CO2

TOYOTA GR YARIS

The perfect recipe? Small, manual gearbox, turbo power – it's hard to argue with the fundamentals of Toyota's homologation special

PRICE £44,250 **POWERTRAIN** 1618cc turbocharged three-cylinder, six-speed manual, all-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 276bhp @ 6500rpm, 288lb ft @ 3250rpm, 5.2sec 0-62mph, 143mph **WEIGHT** 1280kg **EFFICIENCY** 32.1-32.5mpg (official), 197g/km CO2

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

Mk8.5 GTI is a welcome return to form for the famous three letters, blending the Golf's usability with a load more aggression and attitude

PRICE £42,155 **POWERTRAIN** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, seven-speed dual-clutch automatic, front-wheel drive **PERFORMANCE** 296bhp @ 5300rpm, 295lb ft @ 2000rpm, 5.6sec 0-62mph, 155mph **WEIGHT** 1459kg (DIN) **EFFICIENCY** 37.4mpg (official), 171g/km CO2

The final reckoning

The quartet that have shone brightest so far go head to head at Croft circuit, in wet and dry

The names have been around a long time; they've all evolved brilliantly

After two days testing 10 cars, we're down to four finalists. All the EVs have been stood down, with only the Hyundai really shining, while the Mini is the sole petrol model not to make the cut. Now Croft circuit will help us decide a winner from the Civic Type R, Golf GTI Clubsport, Audi RS3 and GR Yaris.

But it's raining. By the time we arrive at the former Second World War RAF airfield in North Yorkshire, there's a hazy spray that makes the flat, fast straights and critical braking points rather indistinct from the surrounding topography. This is sub-optimal for assessing the nuances of high-performance cars.

The Golf GTI seems a sensible way to dip a toe in the water and so it proves. It's stable whether I'm flat on the throttle or hard on the brakes, plenty rapid enough, not to mention supple in the Nürburgring setting.

With heat building in its Hankook Ventus S1 Evo tyres, it also has a clear sense of being alive and connected to both the track and the driver. Its light-ish steering keys you into the surface, while the rear is impressively progressive any time you coax it out of line, and there's a willing zing to the turbo four.

So it's a shame it struggles to get the pretty modest 296bhp down to the tarmac, but at least any scrabbling is easy to moderate. And in fairness it is *streaming* wet.

Right now, though, the RS3 has the better of its Wolfsburg rival. The 395bhp super hatch cuts confidently along the straights, performance building progressively rather than with a kick, and it feels rampantly quick and richly tuneful with its five-cylinder gurgle. It pulls an easy gap over the Golf on the straights, the advantage significantly compounded through Croft's corners.

Front tyres that are wider than the rears provide decent bite considering the conditions, but more useful is how intuitively ▶

Ben Barry doing what Ben Barry does best; any car, any bend

and rapidly the Audi diverts power to the rear as you exit a corner, letting you cancel the understeer and tap into the RS3's huge reserves of drive.

Exiting the 90° right-hander at Tower, I've got maybe 5° of opposite lock on, but the Audi digs into the surface and robustly hauls itself out where the Golf would flounder. Through the long, mid-speed right at the start of the lap, it'll even do a fair impression of the old Quattro rally car – settling into a four-wheel drift accompanied by chirrups of flutter from the dump valve as I play with the throttle.

Pulling back into the pits, I'm convinced the RS3 is in with a shot at glory. Not so much the Civic Type R, which is just dreadful in the wet. This is surprising, given its 326bhp is only 10 per cent up on the Golf and both cars have a locking differential – mechanical in the Civic, electronic in the Golf – to tame their front axles. The Japanese five-door washes wide the second I so much as breathe on the throttle – sometimes so rapidly I fear slipping off the side of the track and into the barriers beyond.

The Type R is also too stiff in R+ and Sport damping modes, with the rear kicking out quickly when I flow some moderate speed to the fast left that leads into the Jim Clark Esses. Comfort mode calms it down but it feels wise to park the Honda and wait for the better weather forecast later today.

The GR Yaris is a proper Scrappy-Doo of a hot hatch, always bursting with attitude

The GR Yaris is positively heroic in comparison. Updated last year with extra power and a revised chassis, first impressions are that it's rather workmanlike, from the cheap slab of dashboard to seats that – while lower than those in the pre-facelift car – don't cup you as brilliantly as the Civic's.

Neither can the Toyota's steering, gearshift or far from perfectly aligned pedals come close to the mechanical tactility of its domestic rival. But the steering's chunky precision sets the scene for a focused drive – and makes the Golf's helm feel decidedly sleepy in comparison.

It takes just one lap to know I'd place the Toyota top in these conditions. Key is the combination of a gently adjustable and compliant chassis, mechanical bite and the reassurance of its rear-biased all-wheel-drive system, particularly the way it finds such positive drive through mid-speed corners. At fast and flowing Croft, the GR Yaris is a proper Scrappy-Doo of a hot hatch, always bursting with attitude and ready to go.

Most astonishing of all is just how much fight there is in the little turbocharged three-cylinder engine – even in fifth gear at 85mph it pulls hard, where a typical economy-focused triple will get breathless. The flexibility lets you short shift, carry speed and calm everything down. If you want to have maximum fun whatever the weather, minimise off-track excursions and give supercars nightmares, the GR Yaris takes some beating.

But as we break for lunch (this really is quite significant toil), there's a nagging suspicion that today's weather is preventing us from truly exploring these cars' characters. I don't yet feel confident to declare a winner, and our previous road driving suggests the Civic in particular can shine far brighter.

Thankfully a chill breeze is drying the last vestiges of dampness from the track as we sit in the Croft break room, and by 1pm it's bone dry. Come 1.07pm it's obvious we'll have to revise our pre-lunch rankings.

The Audi is the biggest loser, even if it's still very good in the dry. It's just that the comfort we experienced during road driving clearly introduces a level of isolation that limits the depth of driver feel on track. The steering and chassis just aren't particularly connected, a fuzziness that's only amplified by a potent if rather lazy powertrain. There's too much lag, a softness to its responses ▶

RF74 ZTR
GX74 YZF
KY25 DFE
GTI

Civic the most skittish on test, wet or dry

Quality of Audi's cabin materials still a cut above

GX74 YZF
GRFOUR

Adjustability of the GR Yaris chassis impresses everyone

Facelifted Clubsport a welcome return to form for the Golf GTI

In the wet, these positions would be reversed

and the gearchanges glide more than pop.

Where the Audi falls back, the Golf steps up to the plate. It's composed, safe and supple, but with a level of detail through its controls and a vitality to its powertrain that makes the Audi seem a little numb. Patience is still required to avoid igniting the VW's front tyres, but there's a cohesion to this GTI that instantly encourages an attacking style. Even the combination of squish, support and position offered by the seats is bang on. This is your hot hatch for all occasions, same as it ever was.

The Civic easily has the measure of it on a dry track, though. Where it struggled in the wet, now the precise and responsive controls combine with a front axle that actually has a chance of getting the power down.

When it does, the Civic is rampantly rapid. There's a little lag then a slug of boost to spike your heart rate – a binary character that adds to the drama and is intensified because you're shifting gears manually and dancing over perfectly placed pedals.

This focus extends to a chassis that feels tight, front-led and reminiscent of a touring car. Pointy and direct, it never quite sheds its stiffness and wants to straighten quickly any time I get the rear end moving. All the rivals are more languid but the Honda's clinical approach to picking apart a lap has its own appeal. Braking is pretty fantastic too, with good feedback from the pedal.

But it also feels like Honda has missed a trick in not making this generation of Type R four-wheel drive, because with Croft dry and the front Michelins doing a much better job of putting the power down, it still pushes wide under power. This gets a little tedious.

Given the Civic now has so much of the spirit of Mitsubishi Evos and Subaru Imprezas of old, it'd feel fantastic with the kind of gritty mechanical all-wheel-drive system of those WRC homologations.

As it is, the Civic is widely admired by all our testers, yet its lack of front-end bite ultimately holds it back. However, while the Golf and Audi are better daily drivers – and superior to drive here in the wet – they place third and fourth overall respectively. The Civic might have more flaws but when it's on form – a great road, a dry track – only one other car can beat it, and that's the GR Yaris.

Leagues ahead of the Civic in the wet, it carries that momentum into the dry, fundamentally feeling much the same but allowing you to explore so much more of its potential – tweaking its short chassis, using the rear-biased all-wheel drive and the three-cylinder engine's generous torque.

That it's also one of the most affordable models in this entire test seals the deal.

BEN BARRY

With thanks to the team at Croft for their endless helpfulness and enthusiasm: visit croftcircuit.co.uk for their full calendar

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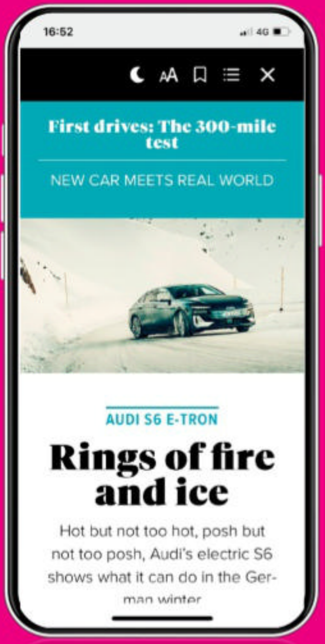
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First drives: The 300-mile test

NEW CAR MEETS REAL WORLD

AUDI S6 E-TRON

Rings of fire and ice

Hot but not too hot, posh but not too posh, Audi's electric S6 shows what it can do in the German winter

20 NEW CARS 25

From bargain EVs to fuel-fired supercar heroes – we rank the 25 most important cars coming soon

25

AMG GT 4-DOOR EV

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

It's finally time – whether we're ready or not – for an AMG model that makes zero noise

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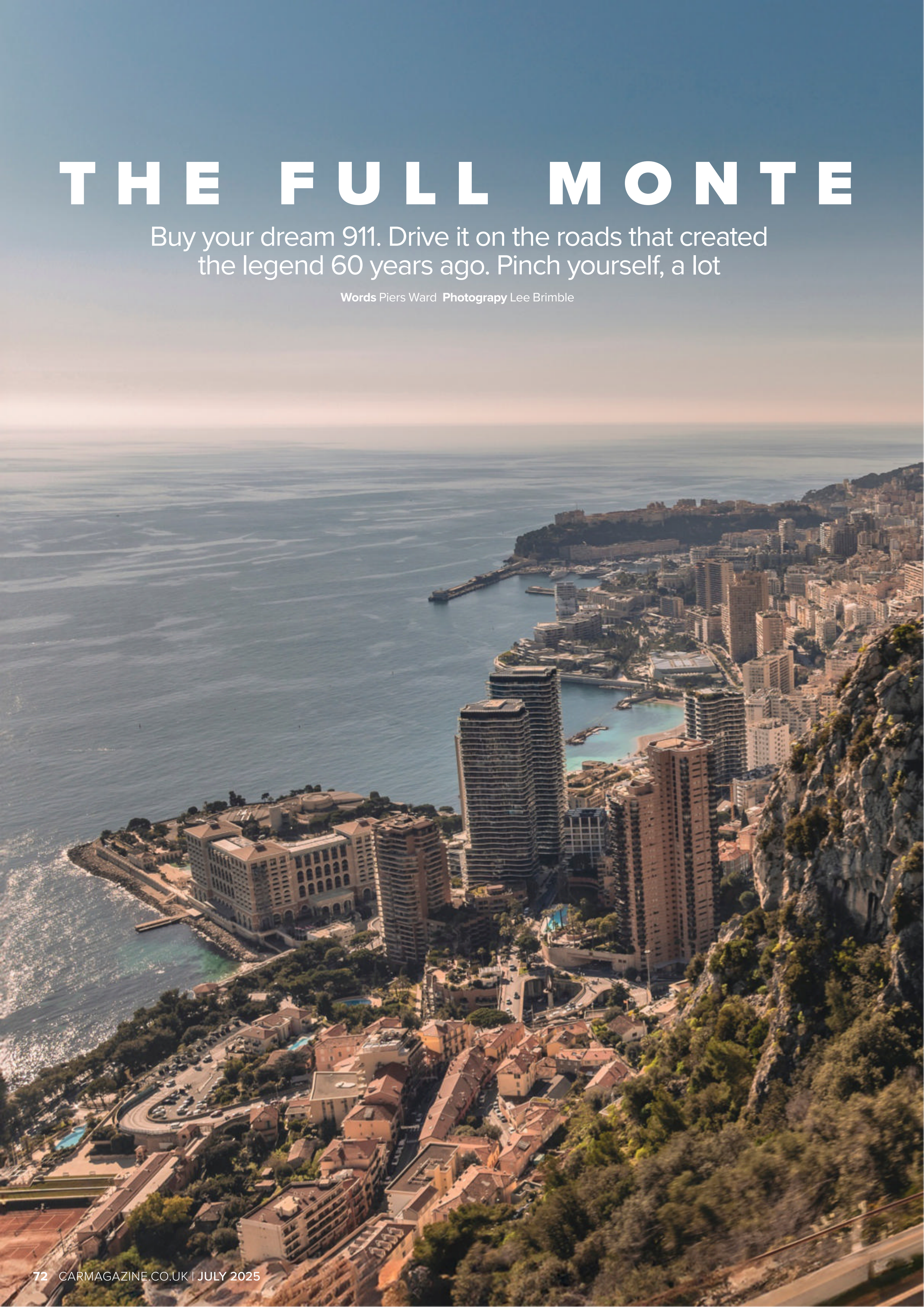


THE FULL MONTE

Buy your dream 911. Drive it on the roads that created the legend 60 years ago. Pinch yourself, a lot

Words Piers Ward **Photograpy** Lee Brimble

Describing his history with the Porsche 911, there's a danger Romain Dumas might be getting a bit misty-eyed. 'When I was a kid, I saw a 911 on a rally. I saw a 911 at Le Mans. I saw a 911 even in a rallycross and a 911 in a hillclimb. This kind of car was capable of everything and could perform everywhere.'

This is the same Romain Dumas who has won Le Mans and who has driven, raced, rallied and hillclimbed the 911 in more places than probably anyone else on earth. GT3 on the ice of the Monte Carlo rally? Tick. Driving one to 6734 metres above sea level? Tick. Le Mans, Nürburgring, Spa, Pikes Peak. Been there, won that.

Over the 20-plus years of his career, it's always the 911 he keeps coming back to. For Romain, read Piers Ward: less French, definitely less talented but just as in love with this weird, rear-engined paradox of a sports car. On any sensible level, it's not a car you should covet but still it gets into your soul; Dumas talks of it being 'authentic'.

This is why I find myself in a Porsche centre in Newport on a wet day in January, staring down the barrel of blowing the vast majority of our family savings on a Meteor Grey 997.1 Carrera 4S. What would Romain do?

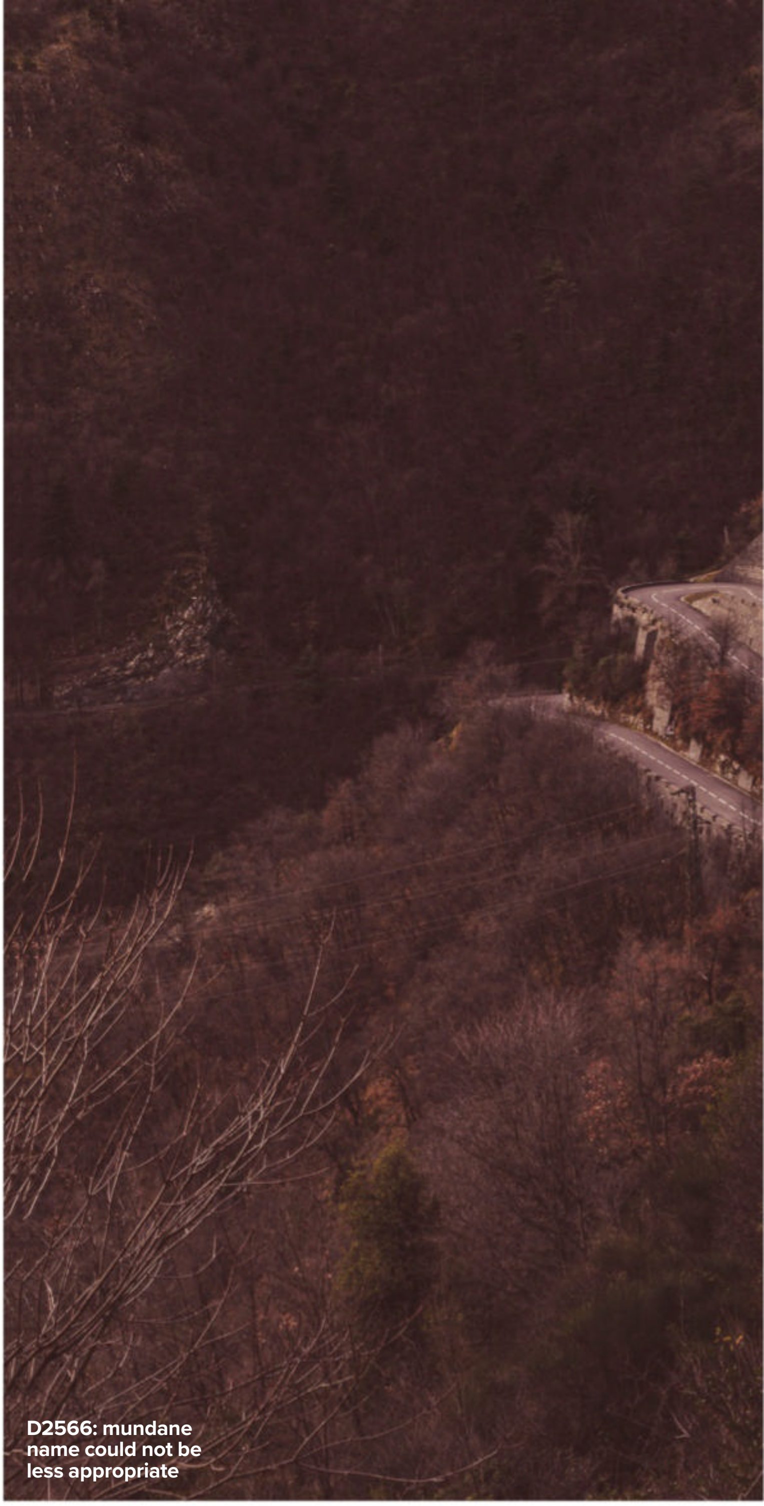
I've wanted a 911 for decades, apart from a momentary blip around the time of the 1997 British Motor Show when TVR unveiled the Speed 12. Blame teenage hormones. But the Porsche has consistently been my dream car for years: when my children pipe up with 'I want' this or 'I want' that, my standard response has always been: 'Well *I* want a 911 – but that's not going to happen.'

Bang goes that argument. The dealer hovers, anxious to seal the deal before the weekend, while I pretend to be distracted by a Cayman GT4. He shuffles closer, to the point where I can no longer ignore him. Crunch time. We shake hands and I nervously totter off: keen to call mates and brag; less keen to call home and explain my man maths.

Or to tell my dearly beloved that, within a month, I'll be driving *my* 911 to the South of France to experience the roads that forged the legend. In my head, it's the perfect excuse: if you're going to buy your dream car, you might as well make the first trip one to remember.

The Monte Carlo rally: legendary stages like the Col de Turini or the historic Casino backdrop; YouTube footage of cars slithering on ice, foglights pointing in all directions like searchlights scouring for escaped prisoners. Dumas notched up a class win in a GT3 in 2017 (his takeaway: 'To do the Monte Carlo in a 911 is about staying on the road and trying not to crash') but it's to 1965 that we must first turn, as that's when a 911 first entered.

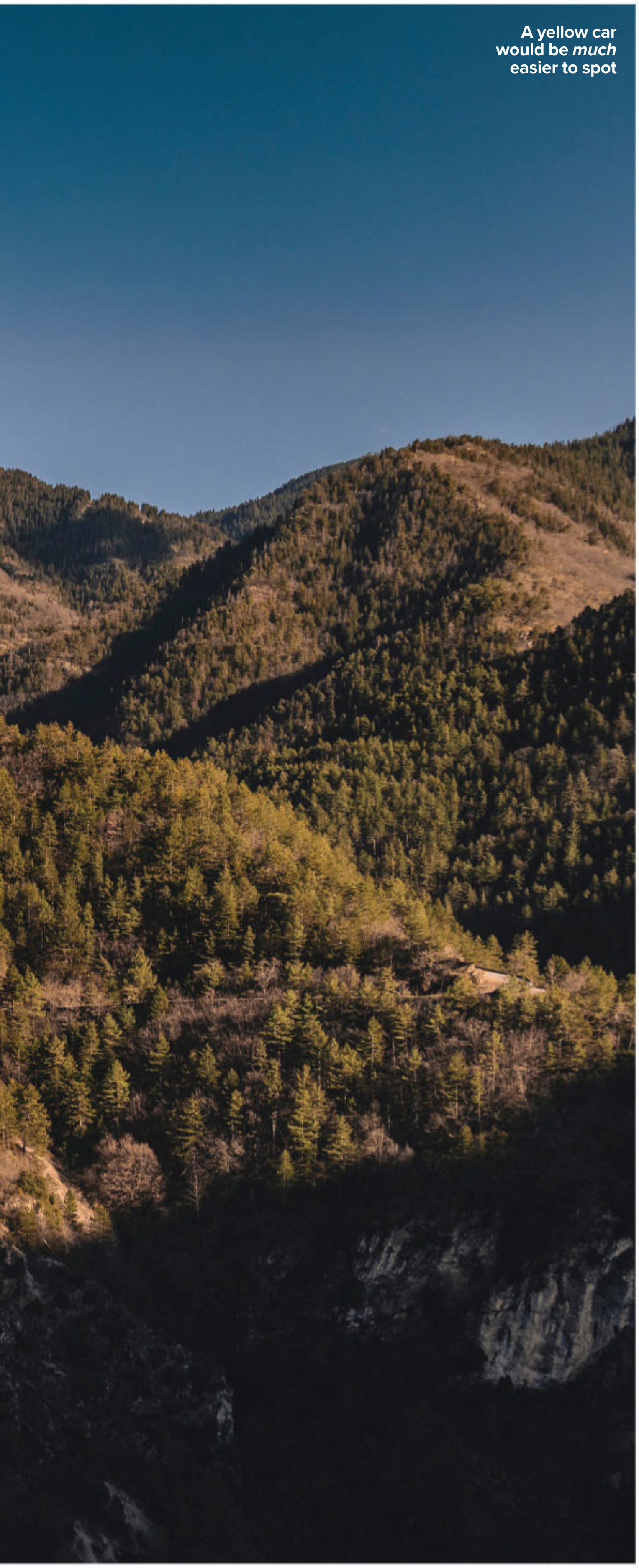
It only took a couple of years before people worked out that the ▶



D2566: mundane name could not be less appropriate

4S means snow shot is twice as dramatic

997.1 misses the later LED daytime running lights



A yellow car would be *much* easier to spot

911's combination of excellent traction and decent power should make a winning combination on the switchbacks of the Monte Carlo rally. Herbert Linge and Peter Falk managed to finish fifth in 1965 but 1968 was the landmark year, when the 911 T of Vic Elford and David Stone secured the overall win thanks in part to a rule change that ditched the previous handicap system penalising bigger engines. In 1968, it was all about the fastest car outright – and no one was going to stop Quick Vic.

It was Elford's year, the Monte victory starting an unprecedented sequence of further wins at Daytona and Targa Florio, the sort of jack-of-all-trades disciplines that Dumas can relate to. The details of Elford's Monte run defy belief: locked in a duel with the Renault-Alpine of Gerard Larousse, he not only clawed back 31 seconds over the fearsome Col de la Couillole, he also gapped Larousse by a further 21 seconds. That's a total difference of nearly a minute on a single stage. He never looked back.

Is this what seals the legend of the 911? Over 60 years, it's difficult to pin it down to one event – but this is up there in the pantheon of 911 landmarks. Elford and the 911 are still spoken of in hallowed terms, the victory reverberating down the ages, to the point where modern legends like Dumas and Sébastien Ogier still talk about it.

We're standing on the Col de la Couillole now, the road dropping away on either side and snow blanketing the mountains around us. At 1678 metres, we're eye-balling the clouds – distant peaks wear the wisps of moisture like mini skirts. The road is dry but the temperature is low, the ice refusing to budge from its hideouts in the shadows. I'm glad I fitted some Pirelli Sottozero II winter tyres ahead of the journey, as much for the confidence they give you as anything else.

In the car park at the Col, it's a chance to take stock. Personally, the 997 remains peak 911, partly because I can make the maths just about add up but also because it feels like a proper moment in the history of the 911, from a time when Porsche combined the best of the 911's timeless qualities with some modern convenience. It's a modern car without modern annoyances, and it maintains the essence of what made it great in the first place: small, wieldy, naturally aspirated. Yet it's recent enough to bring the prospect of decent reliability (with a bit of luck; 997s can suffer from bore scoring, where the piston rings scar the cylinder walls, but mine has been checked out). Dumas agrees, albeit on a slightly different level: 'I have the best one, a 4.0-litre 997 [GT3 RS]. It's the last one that was really extreme.'

WE'RE LEVEL WITH THE CLOUDS, WORN BY DISTANT MOUNTAIN PEAKS LIKE MINI SKIRTS

Mine is a 2007 Carrera 4S six-speed manual (I've never got on with the newer seven-speeder). The manual 'box was non-negotiable when I was searching for a car: this generation also came with Tiptronic (yeuch!) and the 997.2 got the first PDK, but the manuals are rare now. It also has hydraulic power steering (20 years later, Porsche is just about making the electrically assisted system work this well) and the slightly smaller dimensions that remind me more of the '63 original than the wider-hipped modern stuff.

Up on the Col, it looks special; not charming or cheeky like my old Fiat Panda, but with purposeful potential. The heat soak from our run up here makes the car tick with quiet intent and the salt-lashed sides hint at the miles we've done: after all the plains of France, it's time to test the 911's mettle.

Key inserted into barrel, twist to start; from the off, it's more ▶

TREAD CAREFULLY

Watch any Monte Carlo rally footage and you'll know that winter tyres are a necessity – twisty roads slathered in ice while snow banks wait to catch out the unwary. It snared Larousse in '68, thanks to local oiks throwing snow on the road, and Romain Dumas said his class win in 2017 was 'just about trying to survive' among all the ice.

My car, bought in January, came on summer tyres, so I replaced those with Pirelli Sottozero II winter tyres. But then again, my journey to Monte Carlo would involve incredible variety: glorious T-shirt weather on the Monte course yet -5°C outside Reims.

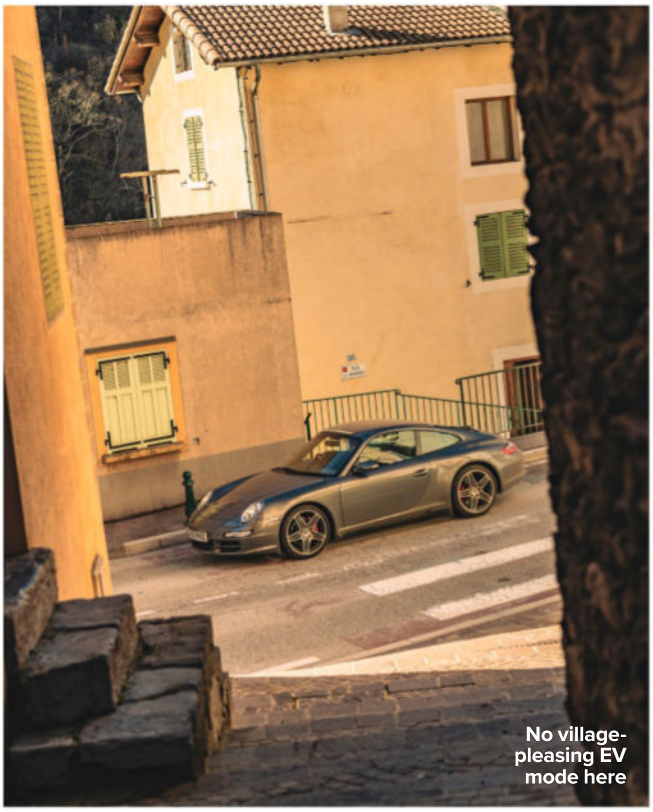
Given those mixed conditions, I wondered if an all-season might be a better option. Speaking to Pirelli engineers, though, the compromise of the all-season, while suitable for general family cars, is not ideal on a sports car. Pirelli UK R&D director Paul Heaton explains: 'The level of mobility you get in winter [from an all-season tyre] isn't close to what you'll get from a true winter.'

That's especially valid in the case of the 911, where the engine layout places a particular strain on the rear tyres. 'Porsches that are rear-engined shift that weight distribution so, when hitting the manufacturer's targets for the tuning, the tyre specifications can be quite different to a mid-engined sports car,' according to Ross Landon, Pirelli's UK product development manager.

The rubber needs all the help it can get. On a true winter, for instance, the sipes (slits in the tread) are wider and designed to pack with snow because that's where the greatest grip lies – 'the strongest bond is snow on snow,' says Landon. The engineers also have to factor in 'chemical' grip, generated from the compound itself.

On the Sottozero II, Pirelli made specific design changes to hit the targets it had set itself. So there are fewer longitudinal grooves in the new tyre and it's a directional, symmetric design.

Out on the road they are a great boon to my confidence, combining with all-wheel drive into a warm hug of reassurance.



No village-pleasing EV mode here

MÉTROPOLE
NICE CÔTE D'AZUR
TURINI
tude 1 607 m
Tour de France

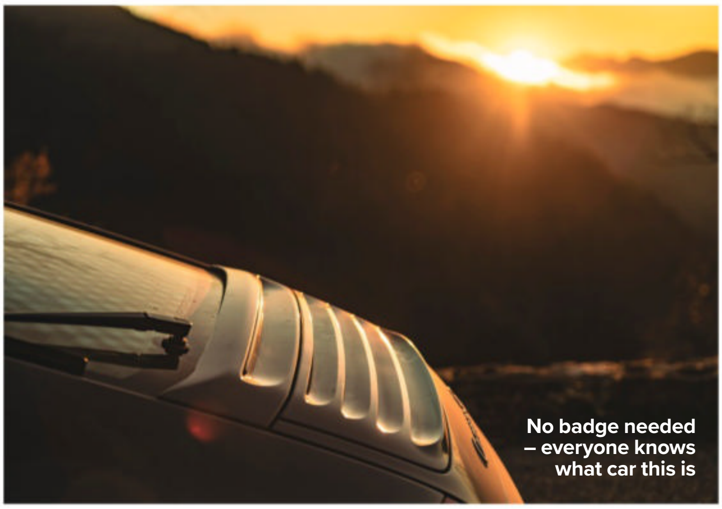
Flat-six plus empty, twisting road equals happy Piers

CD player has gone, making room for Apple CarPlay

Les Alpes-Maritimes à Vélo
Grand Tour
Col du
Tour de France

Who needs a bike when you have a 911?

Extra width of latest 911s would make this passage even tighter



No badge needed – everyone knows what car this is

organic than modern cars. Manual seats set low, vision framed by the clarity of interior design that's been consistent across the car's 62-year history.

Quick cough as the pistons push/pull a couple of times, then that wonderful flat-six burble. Fortunately I've parked near a wall so the echo reinforces the choice I made in Newport – it sounds unique, and brings memories of driving these cars flooding back; the impressions of every single variant of 911 tattooed into my mind and made real right here. My car doesn't have an aftermarket exhaust but that doesn't bother me; inside and out it has enough attitude, especially when you get above 5500rpm. Dumas talks of the commonality of the generations and he's right.

The road drops away into a series of switchbacks that only slowly reveal themselves thanks to the pine trees lining the route. The steering is glorious. It makes the 997 feel alive even at 30mph, tingling with feedback over the tarmac and setting up a lovely tango with the chassis, the rear bouncing just enough to let you know about all the weight behind the rear axle.

As we plunge lower, the temperature climbs, hitting a maximum of 12°C. The sun has bleached the tarmac a pale grey, previous rock-salt dosings leaving a dusty white powder at the edges that gets whipped up as the 911 passes. We stop to admire the view and every breath is like a health spa for your lungs.

God was very generous designing this part of France. The road snakes along the midriff of the mountain, massive peaks above dwarfing the little 911 as we thread our way towards our ultimate destination of Monaco. Every corner negotiated reveals another incredible vista; tunnel followed by searing sunlight, blackness followed by stark light and faded colours. Swallows swirl and pay chicken with the cliffs, trying to catch unseen insects loitering close to the rocks. I can see the road running into the distance and it looks like it gets even better, with fewer hairpins and more flow. That should mean less hard work for the Porsche's brakes and a chance to let the flat-six breathe a bit harder towards the 7300rpm redline.

> **THE 911 IS ONLY JUST NARROW ENOUGH – A LAMBORGHINI WOULD BE HELL UP HERE**

It's a glorious cacophony, full of peaks and troughs from 2000rpm to 7300rpm; not consistent like a modern engine as it goes through the odd flat-ish spot, but no less addictive for it.

The road is magnificent but I'm constantly wondering how Vic did it all those years ago. The 911 is only just narrow enough – a Lamborghini would be hell up here – and it requires constant concentration and adjustment of your eyes' focal length. A neck-crane around the next corner, then a glance further down the valley to see if a lorry might be slowly graunching its way towards us. There are barriers running down the side of the road but I wouldn't want to rely on them – wooden in places, concrete blocks in others, both reminders of the importance of giving yourself plenty of room.

It's fabulously quiet, like our own private racetrack; to think we're only a couple of hours outside the chaos and money of Monaco and Nice. At one point we see a Renault 4, heroically being driven *up* the hill and with impressive commitment, if the levels of lean are anything to go by. He waves as he passes.

The gearbox on my car has a reassuringly short throw thanks to a previous owner fitting an aftermarket, but official, short-shift gear selector kit (£350). It's a lovely action, and enables you to punch ▶

through the ratios much quicker than with the standard lever. One quirk is that it hates first gear when it's cold – you solve it by dropping into second then into first – but once up to temperature it's possible to rush it across the gate fast enough to barely let the revs drop.

We push on towards the Col de Turini, in no danger of breaking any of Quick Vic's records today. The bleached rocks give way to moist vegetation clinging to the cliff faces as fingers of snow again start to creep up to the sides of the road, menacingly lying in wait in case I drop a tyre too close to the edge. Melting snow runs across the tarmac in places, dark tear stains mourning the fading light.

Day two dawns. It feels like a good moment to fire up *Good Times, Bad Times* by Led Zeppelin, which is happily possible on my 911 because a previous owner had the wisdom to retrofit Apple CarPlay. Costing just over £1000, it transforms the daily ability of the 997.

From the Col de Turini, it's another descent into another valley, the 911 powertrain in Sport mode to make the most of the sharper throttle response, but Normal for the dampers as Sport is too much even on these fine bits of tarmac. (PASM, Porsche Active Suspension Management, was standard on the S back then.)

More switchbacks – is it possible to wear out a steering rack? The Route de Sospel keeps on giving, with the 911 upping its game to match. The brakes are lovely and firm, with just the right spacing to the throttle pedal to make heel-and-toeing easy. The rev-match function on the 911 S/T does make things more reliable than in the 997, but in Vic's wheel tracks the cheat mode on the S/T would feel odd. You get the sense that Vic would prefer it *au naturel*.

WE PUSH ON TOWARDS THE COL DE TURINI, IN NO DANGER OF BREAKING QUICK VIC'S RECORD

Up ahead looms the arch at the chapel Notre-Dame de la Menour and beyond it the iconic masterpiece of the Monte Carlo rally. The sun dapples the far mountain tops and one of the world's finest bits of tarmac unfurls below the 997. Narrow, treacherous, glorious.

Again, we're alone, just me and the echo of the flat-six off the far hills. It's here that 30 years of want reaches its crescendo, as the car arcs round each corner perfectly, up and down gears, baritone bark accompanying every change. The steering is joyously organic, fluid and smooth, precise and forgiving, and allied so well to that rear-end roll, lean and squirt that comes every time you exit a bend.

The road serves up one last vista, the Mediterranean glinting in the distance as we crest the hill before dropping down towards the coast. But 20 minutes later we're stuck in traffic. Ah, real life.

There is one last homage we need to pay to those pioneers of '65 and '68. Threading along Monaco's Grand Prix loop and into the famous tunnel, we head along the harbour and towards Prince Albert's palace where so many iconic photos have been taken.

Monaco is not a place for winging it – security cameras lurk on every street corner and as we approach the palace on the hill overlooking Monaco harbour, two policemen and some Japanese tourists look slightly perplexed as to why an 18-year-old 911 is trying to park in the Monegasque equivalent of Buckingham Palace's front drive.

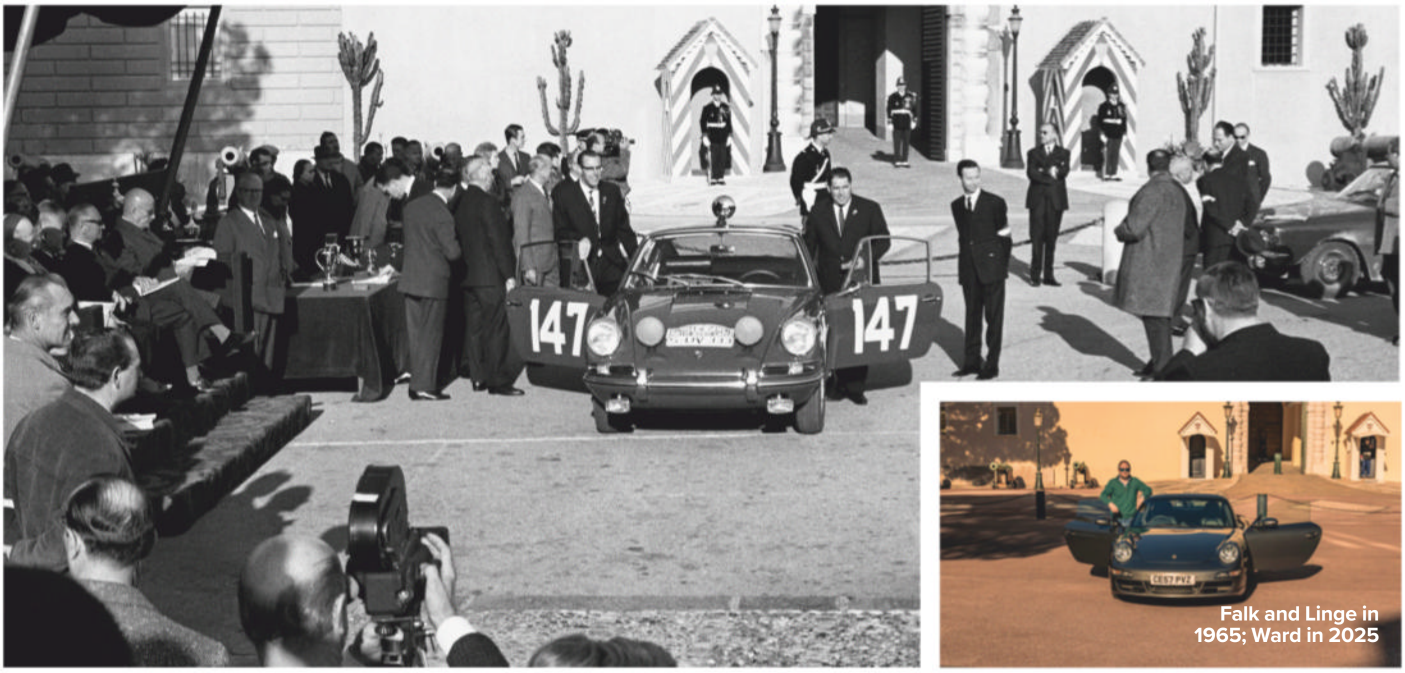
The tourists look even more baffled as a middle-aged Brit steps out clad in a bottle-green V-neck sweater and denim jeans. Fortunately, they're too polite to boo. That would definitely have spoiled my pinch-me moment and my quest to be stood right here with this car.

Dumas has one remaining wish of the 911 – to Dakar one – but I'm done. It doesn't get better than this. **car**

Channelling our inner Ayrton Senna, circa 1988

PORSCHE 911 (997) CARRERA 4S

PRICE £72,030 (2007), £40,000 (now)
POWERTRAIN 3824cc 24v six-cylinder, six-speed manual, all-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 350bhp @ 6600rpm, 295lb ft @ 4600rpm, 4.8sec 0-62mph, 179mph
WEIGHT 1475kg
EFFICIENCY 24.0mpg (official), 24.6mpg (tested), 285g/km CO2
ON SALE 2004-2013



Falk and Linge in 1965; Ward in 2025

EAST

ANGULAR

The Esprit is 50. Helped by dedicated owners and the people who created it, we tell the story of the Lotus that dared to be different

Words Mark Walton **Photography** John Wycherley

Giugiaro's glorious vision of a sports car. Or, if you're a film maker, a submarine

LOTUS ESPRIT SERIES 1

PRICE £5884 at launch, £50k-£100k now

POWERTRAIN 1973cc 16v four-cylinder, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

PERFORMANCE 156bhp @ 6580rpm, 140lb ft @ 4800rpm, 8.4sec 0-60mph, 138mph

WEIGHT 914kg

EFFICIENCY 33mpg

ON SALE 1976-1978

Right. I'm going to tell this story without mentioning the Bond movie once. You know the film I mean – the one with the white car… that turns into a submarine… Gah! No! I'm not going there! I refuse to reduce this amazing car to a few seconds of flickering lights and popcorn. That famous appearance is too hackneyed now, like a 1970s rock band touring the country, endlessly performing the same old number one hit. That's Noddy Holder's job! I won't do it!

So, this is NOT a story about The Bond Car. Instead, I want to talk about the Lotus Esprit.

If you think the Esprit looks good now, imagine what it was like seeing it for the first time, 50 years ago. One man who was there was Mike Kimberley, who joined Lotus in 1969 and soon became Lotus founder Colin Chapman's right-hand man. Kimberley ran Lotus after Chapman's death in 1982 and saved the company, eventually retiring in 2009.

Kimberley turns 87 later this year, but both his handshake and his memory remain surprisingly grippy. Kimberley was there when Colin Chapman first met the Esprit's designer, Giorgetto Giugiaro, at the 1971 Geneva motor show.

'It was Olly [Oliver Winterbottom, then designer at Lotus] who wanted us to meet Giugiaro in Geneva, and it was Giugiaro who suggested he wanted to do a show car with us. Colin immediately said "Great idea, marvellous" because we were looking to replace our Twin Cam Europa.'

As soon as they got home, Kimberley prepared a lengthened and ▶

None more '70s, from info pod to banana seats widened Europa chassis and sent it down to Giugiaro at Italdesign in Turin. Chapman, Kimberley and Winterbottom then embarked on an exhausting schedule of flying to Italy two or three times a week to keep track of the project. Kimberley remembers seeing the sketches come to life.

'Imagine, in 1972 – it was absolutely awesome!' he says with a smile. 'Colin and Giorgetto got on incredibly well – they were two creative, innovative people and they fed off each other. It was wonderful to be with them and see it.'

One of Kimberley's many anecdotes concerns the Giugiaro-designed Porsche Tapiro, an extremely wedgy concept from 1970 with gullwing doors: 'We were down there and we saw the Tapiro in the corner of a room, and Giorgetto very kindly said, "Would you like to

The original Series 1 has the exactness of a mathematical formula and it's as timeless as the Golden Ratio

ESSEX TURBO

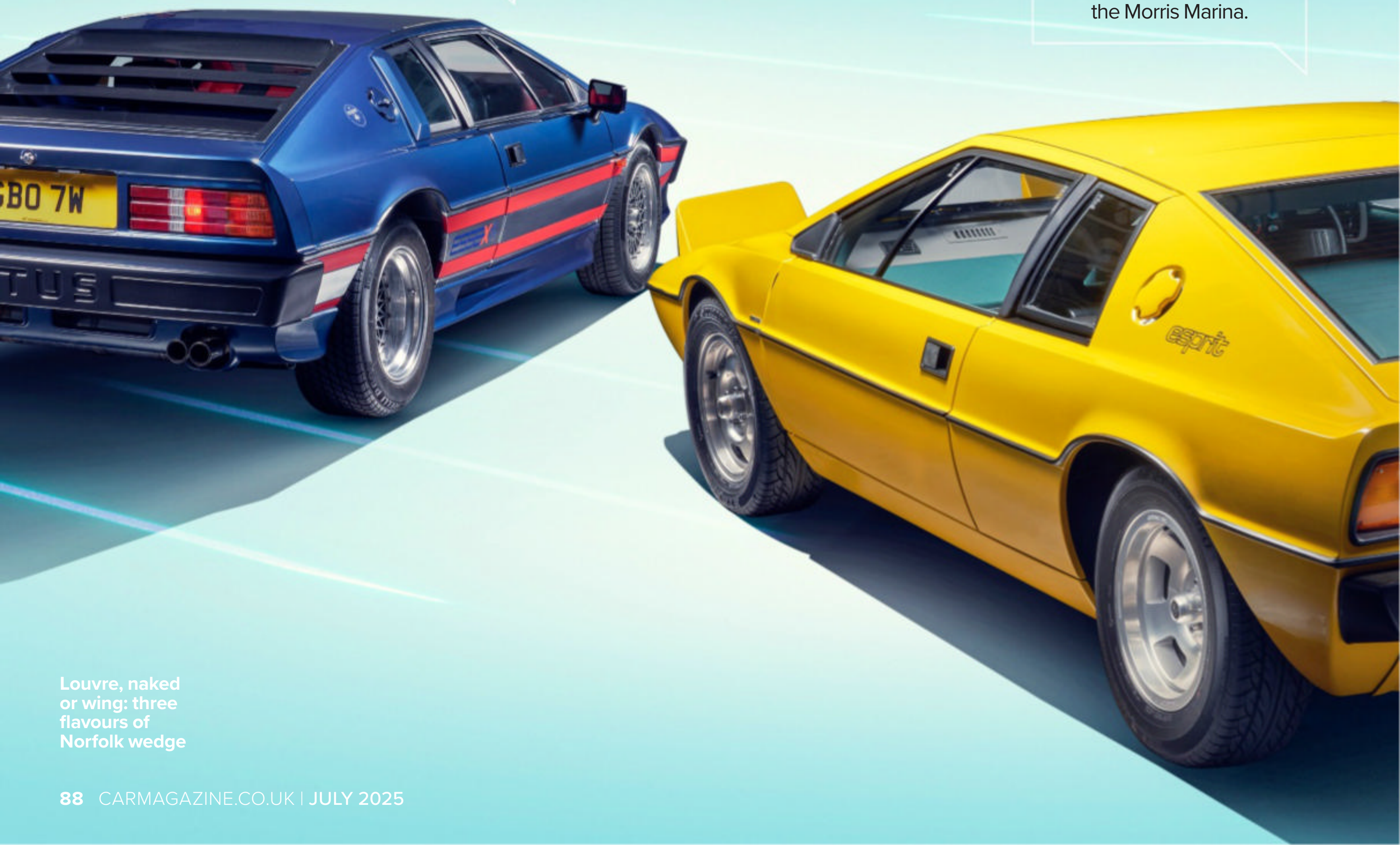
Giugiaro restyled the Essex Turbo, adding a wedgey ducktail. In fact, that spoiler doesn't do much – a more important aero device is the tiny Gurney flap at the top of the louvred rear deck.

As a limited edition – there were originally intended to be 100 cars but production stalled after just 34 examples – each Essex Turbo has a number. This, fantastically, is example is 007.

THE ORIGINAL S1

Giugiaro intended the Esprit to be steel, but Chapman had invested in a boat company and a fibreglass production process, so the S1 has a seam round the middle to hide where the plastic clamshells join.

Recognise the rear lights? Styled in Italy, many of the details were Italian too, including the rear lights from the Fiat X-19. The door handles, however, are famously British – from the Morris Marina.



Louvre, naked or wing: three flavours of Norfolk wedge drive it?" So Colin jumped in the driver's seat and I got in the passenger seat and we drove into Turin.

'Anyway, it started to rain – and you can imagine, Turin on a busy day, in the rain, and the car's windscreen angle was such that with the rain on it, we could hardly see out. Well, we got absolutely lost, I was navigating and got an earful from the Old Man. Eventually the Carabinieri came up, they took us back to Moncalieri [home of Italdesign]. Giorgetto was outside, literally biting his nails because the car cost about a quarter of a million, a lot of money in those days! We had a lot of discussions about windscreen angle after that.'

Giugiaro's stunning Lotus wedge was eventually displayed at the 1972 Turin motor show and it took a further three years to turn his concept into the production Esprit, launched at the Paris show in October 1975. And 50 years later, when I walk out of the Lotus offices at Hethel in 2025 and see Scott Walker's bright yellow example parked in the sunshine, I have the same shock those Paris crowds must have felt, all that time ago.

'A graphical, rigorous, linear style' was how Giugiaro himself described it – and the word 'rigorous' is crucial. The original Series 1 has the exactness of a mathematical formula and it's as timeless as the Golden Ratio.

Scott is an Esprit specialist who originally restored this example for an American customer. It then came back to the UK and was owned by actor and car enthusiast Steve Coogan for a while before Scott bought it himself. It's chassis 39, built in June 1976, making it one of the very first production Esprits. Scott starts telling me how ▶

SPORT 350

The original Esprit gearbox was borrowed from the Citroën SM but in the late 1980s Lotus switched to a Renault transaxle used in the Alpine GTA V6. It was also fitted to the Renault Master van.

As an ultra-low-volume supercar the Lotus relied on parts-bin components for the Esprit to the very end – the Sport 350 has Vauxhall Calibre door handles, Corsa stalks and Peugeot 205 switchgear.

LOTUS ESPRIT ESSEX TURBO

PRICE £20,000 at launch, £100k-£130k now
POWERTRAIN 2174cc turbocharged 16v four-cylinder, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 210bhp @ 6250rpm, 200lb ft @ 4500rpm, 5.6sec 0-60mph, 150mph
WEIGHT 1148kg
EFFICIENCY 23mpg
ON SALE 1980-1981

Essex brought a turbo, taking power to a giddy 210bhp

he first fell in love with the Esprit, and before I know it he's talking about that Bond film: 'I first saw it on my sixth birthday.'

Scott, don't go there.

'Manchester, December 1977,' he continues. 'I wasn't really into Bond and I wasn't really interested in cinema, but that white car made such an impression on me.'

Too late. He said it.

Scott went on to work for Lotus dealer Bell & Colvill in the early 2000s, selling the Elise and Exige, and he remembers how the Esprit S1 wasn't appreciated at the time, hard as that may be to believe now. 'They just weren't liked,' he says. 'You would find them in hedgerows and in gardens. In 2004 I bought chassis 34 for nine grand. Another early car in Scotland, it had been in a garage for years and had to be dragged out – I paid £4000.'

Scott became an independent specialist and then worked at Lotus as head of UK sales, but he's always remained passionate about early Esprits. Prices have since rocketed, as enthusiasts have come to appreciate their status and rarity. Lotus only made 714 Series 1s before the car was upgraded to the S2 in 1978 – and only 268 S1s were right-hand drive. Scott reckons his yellow car is now worth £100k.

And now I'm going to drive it. I open the door – which feels as light as a paper aeroplane – then lower myself into the gloriously retro-futuristic interior, clonking my head on the door frame as I climb in. The cabin is ridiculously low, but once you lie back in the pure, Giugiaro-concept, banana-shaped seats it's surprisingly comfortable and roomy, the dashboard sloping away as steeply as the windscreen is slanting down to meet it. The mad, *Space 1999* binnacle is perched on top, and only the cheap, plastic two-spoke wheel spoils Giugiaro's sci-fi vision.

The S1's sublime Type 907 engine deserves a whole *CAR* feature of its own – an all-alloy, 2.0-litre, 16-valve, four-cylinder, built in-house by Lotus in a huge effort to elevate itself above its kit-car beginnings. The 907 puts out around 160bhp, which is pitiful by modern standards, but bear in mind the S1 weighs around 900kg, a marvel of Lotus light-weighting.

I'd heard all kinds of stories about the Esprit – no torque, dodgy Citroën gearbox – but this S1 quickly dispels all of that. This revvy engine picks up with surprising verve and the gearchange feels wonderfully short-throw and satisfying. Best of all, the legendary Lotus balance is there – the feeling that the Esprit is on its tiptoes, just waiting to change direction.

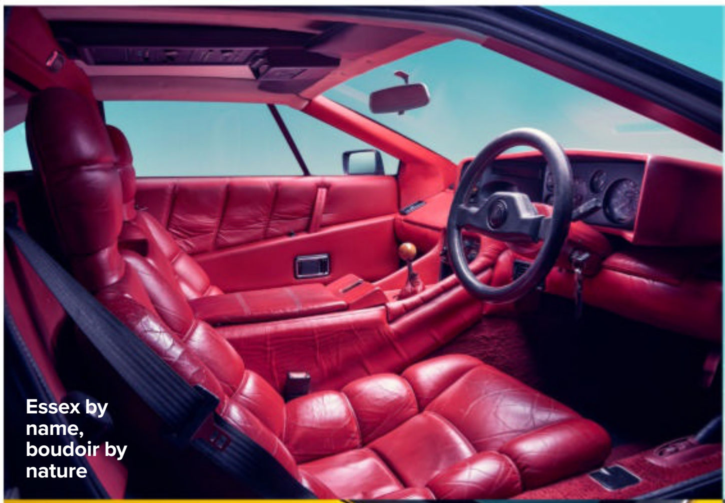
The unassisted steering isn't heavy at speed but it remains resistant, so while you can drive with your fingertips it needs positive inputs to thread the car through corners. It makes you feel like you are absolutely in control, fine-tuning your position and angle by a degree here, a millimetre there. The only thing that's surprising about the way it handles is the floaty rear end, which lacks the pinned-down sharpness of that needle nose.

After a few laps of the Lotus test track, it's clear the S1 is no supercar – it's a sports car, in the '60s tradition, dressed up in that spellbinding shape.

Back in the pits I find another startling-looking wedge. Sharper and meaner looking than the S1, this is Jonathan Hackford's 1980 Essex Turbo, one of the rarest and most sought-after of all Esprits.

Jonathan is another devotee. 'Like many people, I went to see the Bond film and was blown away by that white Esprit,' he tells me, as I choke on my coffee. Please don't talk about Barbara Bach, I implore in my head. 'More than that, I grew up in Norwich. My dad used to bring me to the open days here at Lotus and that's where I first saw an Esprit. They were just like spaceships to a little kid.'

After owning a couple of Elises, Jonathan bought an S1 back in 2014 but he still hankered after an early Turbo. 'I always wanted an



Essex by name, boudoir by nature

The closer you look, the more glorious detail the S1 reveals

WORLD CHAMPION
CAR CONSTRUCTORS 1973 1972 1968
1970 1965
1963

Chapman never shy about milking track glory

They pop up, and they pop down again… on a good day

If the Essex was a big step for the Esprit, seven years later there was a revolution, Peter Stevens' X180

Essex,' he admits. 'I just think they're something else.'

And the Essex was literally something else. The Series 2 had come along in 1978, sorting out many of the Esprit's early teething troubles, but by then the four-cylinder 907 engine was falling behind its competitors. Kimberley and his team developed the dry-sump, 2.2-litre turbocharged Type 910, boosting power to 210bhp and cutting the 0-60mph time from a leisurely eight seconds to more like six. Giugiaro restyled the car with added wings and sills and the livery was taken from the F1 team's sponsor (a fuel company, rather than the county two to the south of Norfolk).

But there's more to the Essex than chrome tape and a turbo – it also had a new, galvanised backbone chassis, a wider front track and a redesigned rear suspension. It was a huge step – and was priced accordingly, at £20,000. Expensive and gaudy, the car wasn't a big hit with customers and the planned run of 100 examples ended after just 34 were produced, before the sales effort shifted to the regular Turbo Esprit.

Of course, now we love the flamboyance of the Essex, with its red leather and its roof-mounted radio – 'with a graphic equaliser!' Jonathan points out. Anyone under the age of 30 won't realise the potency of those words.

Inside, Giugiaro's basic architecture is still here, but with more buttons, dials and fiddly details, plus so much ruched red leather it's like being trapped in Liberace's handbag. The first thing I notice on the move is the squeaking of all that cowhide. But straight away, the Essex has more urge and potency than the S1. Amazingly there is no whistle-bang turbo lag, and it accelerates with a powerful, linear surge. Kimberley tells me their turbo installation really set new standards in its day. And while some of the delicacy of the S1 is lost, the handling has a more determined sense of purpose – the rear end is less flighty and the whole thing feels more stable and predictable.

If the Essex was a big step for the Esprit, seven years later there was a revolution. After more than a decade of production, British stylist Peter Stevens was tasked with redesigning Giugiaro's original shape. The result – which should have been the Series 4 but has always been known as the X180 – was a masterpiece in subtle modernisation. It still looks like an Esprit, and under the skin it's mechanically very similar, but Stevens' car looks so much more substantial, more grown-up than the delicate Giugiaro design.

The X180 was refreshed in 1994 and it was this facelifted car – now dubbed the S4 – that ushered in the V8 engine that Chapman and Kimberley had always envisaged. The Lotus-developed engine, introduced in 1996, was a 3.5-litre, twin-turbo unit capable of producing 500bhp, but detuned to 350bhp to stop the gearbox eating itself.

Which brings us our third car here today, a Sport 350 from 2000, owned by former university lecturer David While. 'I always wanted an Esprit,' David tells me – and I know what's coming next. 'Partly because of Bond,' he explains, 'but originally it was the Europa that got me interested. Eventually I could afford to look around and this one came up for sale at a local dealer. At the time, I probably didn't ▶

Compared to a modern supercar it's a pussycat – but still huge fun on a trackday

● ● ●

know what a Sport 350 was! I've learned a lot since.'

David paid £30k for his Esprit in 2005, and only afterwards discovered that just 42 Sport 350s were built. It has the same 350bhp output as the regular V8, remapped for better in-gear acceleration times, but with lighter, hand-laid fibreglass panels, better brakes, a set of gorgeous magnesium wheels and a carbon wing on the back. It weighs just 1300kg.

David admits he doesn't get to drive his Esprit very often, so I feel honoured to take it out for a few laps at Hethel. It's a very different experience to the S1 and Essex: sitting in it, it feels more serious straight away. The Giugiaro binnacle is gone, replaced by a more conventional dashboard, and the bucket seats and three-spoke steering wheel give this cabin a much more single-minded atmosphere.

On the move, this engine catches me by surprise for the third time today. It just doesn't feel like a V8 – it feels and sounds more like a big, smooth-revving four-cylinder, thanks to its flatplane crank and twin-turbo power delivery. But it is fast – still not lightning quick by modern standards, but impressive in the way it launches out of medium-speed corners.

And despite being the only car here with power steering, it's still incredibly communicative and direct, and like the original this V8 is still so adept at changing direction through a series of esses. Compared to a modern 700bhp supercar it's a pussycat – but this late-model Esprit would still be huge fun on a trackday.

Amazing to think the Sport 350 is itself 25 years old now – it still looks so good, still surprisingly modern. It's a theme that runs through the whole Esprit story – a car that seems to defy the ageing process. Every Esprit of every era somehow remains sensational to this day – a tribute to the teams at Lotus and Italdesign who created it 50 years ago. You could say nobody does it better.

NOOOOOOOOOOO!!!! **car**

Stevens ditched the binnacle for a conventional dash. Still nice

PARTY LIKE IT'S 1965

For the last two years, Classic Team Lotus and the Chapman family have hosted a special 'Garden Party' at East Carleton Manor, the family home near Norwich that Colin helped design at the end of the 1960s. The event is like a Lotus-themed Goodwood Festival of Speed in miniature, with historic F1 cars and Lotus road cars driving through the grounds. This year's event will be held on Saturday 14 June and will celebrate 50 years of the Esprit. Tickets are available at shop.classicteamlotus.co.uk

LOTUS ESPRIT SPORT 350

PRICE £64,950 at launch, £50k-£75k now
POWERTRAIN 3506cc twin-turbocharged 32v V8, five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
PERFORMANCE 349bhp @ 6500rpm, 295lb ft @ 4250rpm, 4.7sec 0-60mph, 175mph
WEIGHT 1300kg
EFFICIENCY 30mpg
ON SALE 1999-2001

LA74 WTD
KV74 OKA

Giant test

THE DEFINITIVE VERDICT

The new sensible

Not so long ago the combination of seven seats and all-electric seemed outlandish. But now it's completely normal, and available in four distinct flavours

Words Colin Overland **Photography** Lee Brimble

KY74 TXD
OE74 BTU

The Beatles changed the world in so many ways, but did so from the ground up, bringing us along with them on the journey. There was a normal, sensible, relatable, inclusive air about them that broke down barriers between generations and genders. Everyone liked them. Before they grew beards and started hanging out with the Maharishi they had a harmless, boy-next-door vibe. And there were four of them, just like your classic nuclear family, so they could actually fit in the house next door, or in a Ford Anglia.

But a decade later, the Osmonds shimmied in like a grinning, high-fiving alien invasion. Although the core of the Utah song-and-dance act was the quartet of Alan, Wayne, Merrill and Jay, it was when they were supplemented by heart-throb younger brother Donny that they really broke through. Add in sister Marie and Little Jimmy and you have the chemistry that took them to their imperial phase. Seven of them. Seven! More than you could fit into the Cavern in Liverpool or the Star Club in Hamburg. They needed a bigger stage. They needed to go the full Vegas.

And then there's their weirdest, most original and most enduring song, *Crazy Horses*. The song's lyric is unambiguous: it's a warning about the harmful environmental effect of the thirsty, dirty cars the Osmonds saw all around them, messing up their white jump suits. Zoom forward to now, and we find that, somehow, the Osmonds were right. Our evidence: today's four test cars, which are not only all electric, they're also big enough to transport the whole troupe. And today they all seem pretty darn normal, even the VW in its retro fancy dress. Sure, electric. Seven seats – why not? This is where we are. Sorry, Ringo. It's Donny's world now, and we're just living in it.

So what exactly are these four cars? What do they have in common, and what splits them? Are they only good as seven-seaters, or are they more versatile than that? And why are they all so expensive?

Our main route at the centre of several days of testing takes us from the East Midlands to the East Riding of Yorkshire: over the Humber Bridge, skirting Hull on our way to the coast, and specifically Withernsea. It's a route that involves a great variety of roads – motorways, fast A-roads, slow ring roads, town, country and seafront promenade. Between us our test team had driven all of them previously, but when you have such a diverse group of cars it's only fair to try them back to back on the same mix of roads, and make sure everyone gets to drive everything, and sit in the back of everything. A decent mileage also means you get to record your own efficiency and range figures, and experience charging them for yourself.

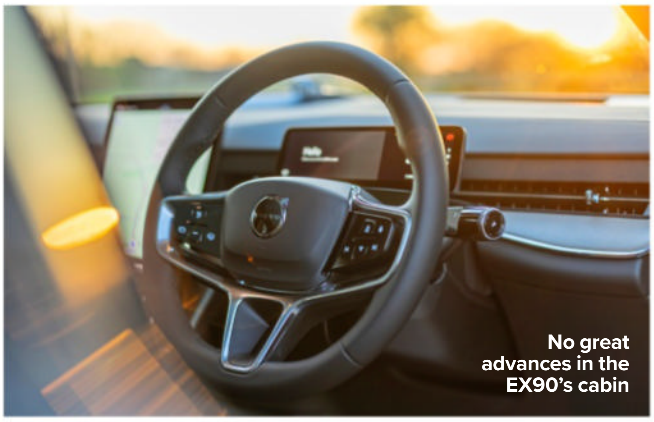
The newest car is the Volvo. The EX90 was initially billed as the electric replacement for the hugely popular XC90, the SUV that did more than any other car to bring Volvo into the modern world and sold in huge quantities. But then some of the wind went out of the electric boom and the XC90 got a new lease of life, so XC and EX sit alongside one another in the current line-up.

The general idea is very much the same: tall, roomy, comfortable, refined. There's a choice of three power levels – Single Motor (335bhp), Twin Motor (402bhp) or Twin Motor Performance (510bhp), which we have here. On a 250kW rapid charger, it should get from 10 to 80 per cent in 30 minutes, which corresponds with our experience.

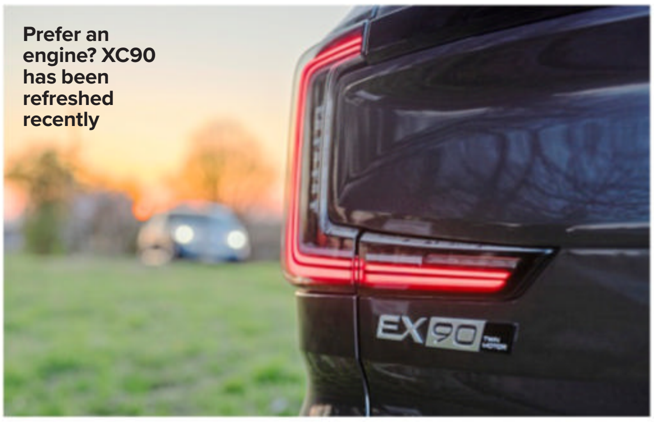
Despite appearances, the EX90 isn't an electric XC90. Rather, its underpinnings are derived from those of the electric Polestar 3, which is only offered in five-seat form. It's the only Volvo currently using this platform.

It's a big car, the longest here. You choose from five, six or seven seats. There are two spec levels, Plus and Ultra. Both come well equipped: big central screen (14.5 inches, portrait), running Google Automotive Services (excellent voice control, native Google Maps), with a head-up display, wireless phone charging, automatic LED headlights, 360° cameras, a fixed full-length glass roof, four-zone climate control, a heat pump, and plenty more. Our Twin Motor test car is in Ultra trim, which means adaptive damping, massaging front seats and much else, including cosmetic upgrades inside and out. ▶

> **TODAY THEY ALL SEEM PRETTY DARN NORMAL, EVEN THE VW IN ITS RETRO FANCY DRESS**



No great advances in the EX90's cabin



Prefer an engine? XC90 has been refreshed recently

Spot which one's also available with an engine

Volvo's almost classiness undermined by taxi quips

Maybe the least sleek of Kia's EV family, but it works superbly

The carbuncle at the top of the windscreen may look like a 'taxi' sign waiting to be illuminated, but in fact it houses lidar equipment that's central to Volvo's Pilot Assist system, which helps with the steering up to 80mph and can handle braking and accelerating without your input. In theory it can offer a higher degree of self-driving ability than this, but that's not been activated yet.

On paper, it all adds up to a pretty swish package: modern, powerful, tech-heavy but conservative in its looks. When I arrive at our rendezvous in Withernsea, ready for some North Sea fresh air and a cheerful cuppa at the Castle Cafe, four hours after setting off on an unhurried route from Northampton, I am entirely comfortable and relaxed. Not excited or inspired, to be clear, but that isn't a failing in a family-minded electric SUV.

It has that classic Volvo quality of feeling perfectly happy being driven with half a body and half a mind. The steering is light, there are no gears to change and there's no incentive to switch off the excellent Bowers & Wilkins audio (another benefit of going Ultra). The ride quality is on the soft side, though. Not an issue in a straight line, but life isn't all about straight lines.

But, in a textbook illustration of why Giant Tests are so important, driving the Volvo back to back with its rivals starts to dim my enthusiasm. And my colleagues also have their reservations about the EX.

Matt dePrez tells me: 'I think the performance is quite impressive for such a big car but the throttle response is really poor. There's a good second from flooring the throttle to it actually doing anything, but there's plenty of power there when you need it. In the real world the Kia feels just as quick as the Volvo because its throttle mapping is so much better.'

And Alan Taylor-Jones is agitated by various aspects of the interior: 'This feels like a major step down in quality, with plastic seats and cost-cutting electric window controls. Way too much is operated via the touchscreen, which is not the easiest to navigate, and it's the only one without Android Auto.'

He's not finished yet: 'Third-row space is not what it should be for such a big premium SUV, and the rear pillars are vast.' He's right: all of our testers, of various shapes and sizes, find that the third row isn't very big and isn't very easily reached. What's more, passengers in the second and third rows are not well provided with space under the seat ahead for their feet.

It's not all bad. The seat adjusters are precise and good to the touch. One-pedal driving mode is intuitive and effective, especially on the motorway. From some angles it looks like a Range Rover, and the paint catches the sun rather nicely. And yes, it has a lot of equipment. The problem is that it costs a lot of money, while failing to feel like a £96k car. In isolation it's all fine, but get into pretty much any premium German SUV priced at this level and it will feel more special than the Volvo. As indeed do at least some of today's rivals.

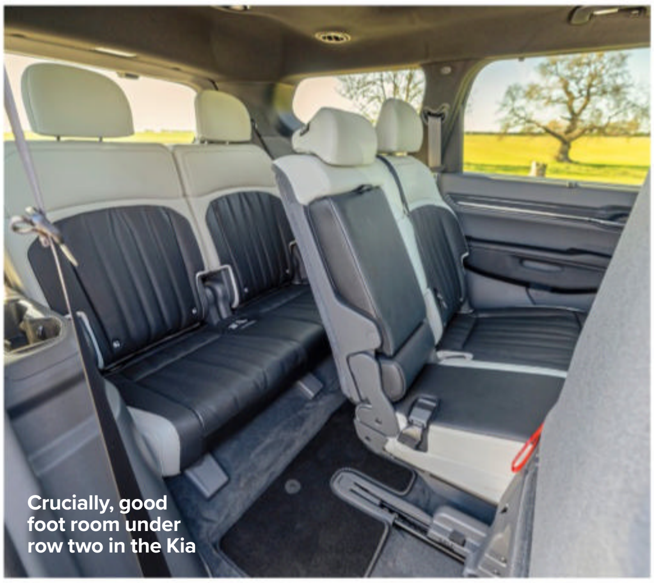
The most direct competitor to the Volvo is the Kia. The same sort of boxy SUV styling, the same striving for classiness and versatility. Similar size, too, at 5015mm long.

Entry-level Air has a single motor and rear-wheel drive. GT-Line and GT-Line S have a dual motor and all-wheel drive. GT-Line S is available as a six-seater with big swivelling chairs in the second row, or a conventional seven-seat arrangement like ours. As you go up through the trim levels you get bigger wheels, massage front seats and even more electronic safety systems. But, thankfully, the cabin doesn't get too digital; like a lot of Kias and Hyundais, it strikes a good balance between physical buttons and on-screen control.

Tester Mal Bailey points out that the headrests are lovely to the touch – a tiny detail, yes, but one that improves the sensual quality of every single journey. Talking of details, Matt dePrez reckons the Kia-Hyundai blind-spot camera system – which shows the relevant image at the relevant time in the instrument panel – is brilliant. 'I think the approach to infotainment and switchgear is probably the best of the bunch, although it's not a great bunch in that regard. At least Kia has included some physical controls for temperature, volume etc, and the buttons for the heated seats and steering wheel are on the door, not in the screen.'

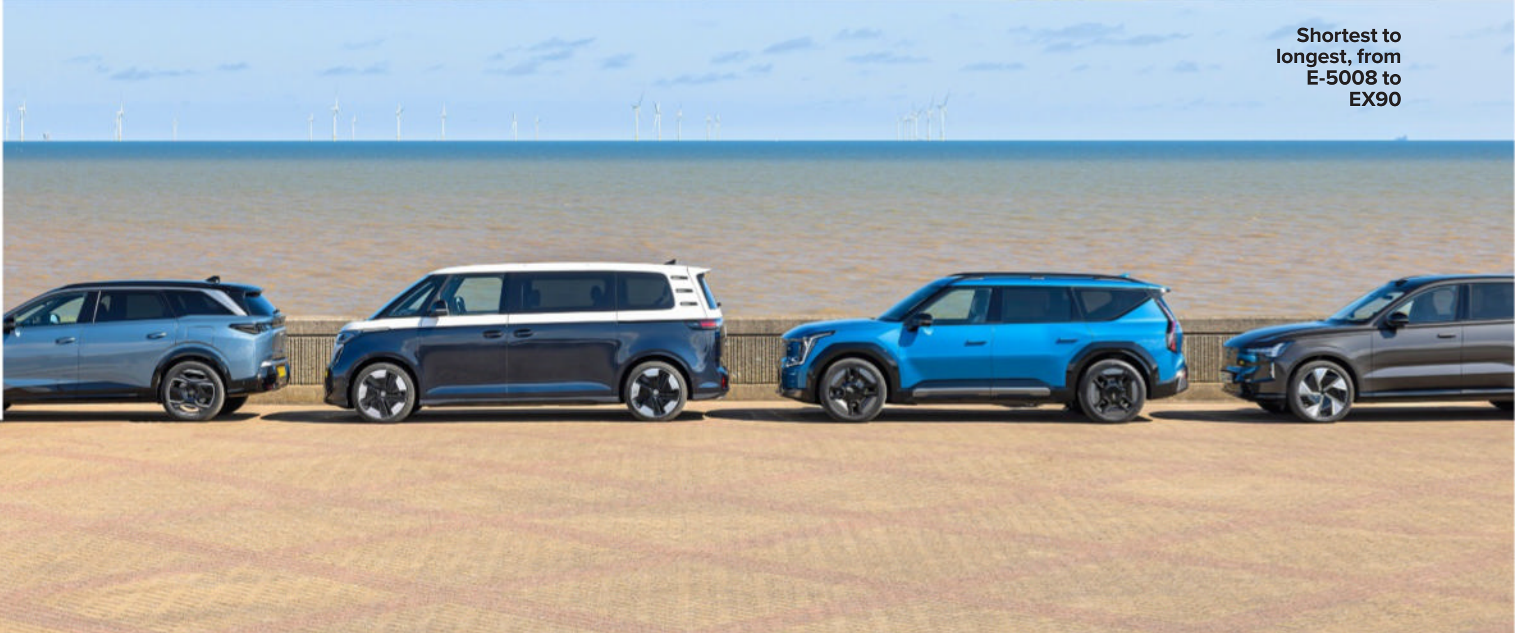
There's good foot room and head room for all three rows. The air vents in the third row are excellent – effective, and well positioned so they're not blasting you. The second row splits 60:40 and slides asymmetrically, which seems odd, especially in a car designed to be an electric seven-seater from the off. Rapid charging from 10 to 80 per cent can be done in 24 minutes. It also has a handy socket for ▶

THIS IS A £70K VW, AND YET SOME OF THE PLASTICS FEEL READY TO SNAP OFF IN YOUR HAND


Crucially, good foot room under row two in the Kia

Longer wheelbase suits the Buzz well

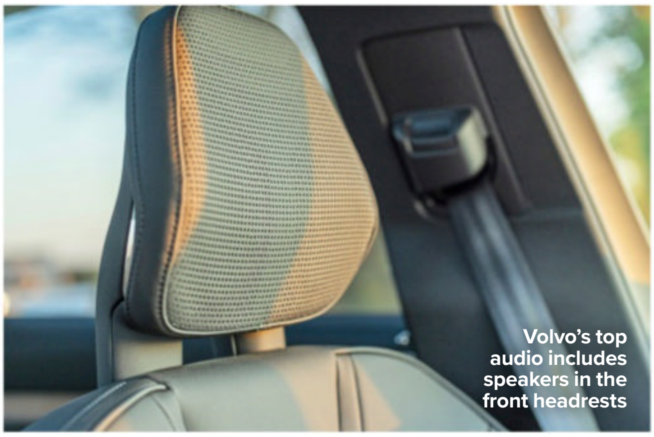
ID. BUZZ
KY74 TXD



Shortest to longest, from E-5008 to EX90

LIKE A LOT OF KIAS IT FINDS A GOOD BALANCE BETWEEN BUTTONS AND ON-SCREEN CONTROL

Those big windows key to VW's ambience



Volvo's top audio includes speakers in the front headrests

charging electronic equipment, or indeed other EVs. Its range is okay, at an official 313 miles and tested 267, but that's not because it's particularly efficient, and it's certainly not because the Lego-alike EV9 is aerodynamically sleek – it's because the battery's big.

The ingredients all sound pretty standard for a fairly posh family electric car. But then you drive it and you're quickly reminded that this is the big sibling of the EV3 and EV6, two of our favourite electric cars – favourites for a lot of reasons. It's much bigger and heavier than those cars, of course, but has a responsiveness that makes a lot of its bulk seem to disappear. The idea is pretty conventional, but the execution is exceptional.

Personally, I regard the Kia as an eyesore. Those wheels, those wheelarches, those… everything. I really wouldn't want it parked outside my house. In which case the related Hyundai Ioniq 9 should do the job nicely: similar, but less ugly. (Go ahead, Hyundai, the slogan's yours if you want it.) If you can cope better than me with the looks, then the Kia is a car to be taken very seriously. It's aiming at pretty much the same targets as the Volvo, but hitting more of them. It is, give or take, better in every way. And cheaper. Also, bear in mind that this is a twin-motor, all-wheel-drive version, when really a single-motor version would be fine, and probably still better than any version of the EX90, even in Kia's entry Air spec.

If the Kia is a superior attempt to do the same things as the Volvo in the same way, the VW is travelling a very different path to a similar destination. It makes so much more sense as a seven-seater than in its original – and still available – five-seat form. This version, with its longer wheelbase and its three rows of seats, does everything better: it's more practical as a people carrier, more helpful when you're trying to use it as a beach hut/cafe/lounge, and somehow more fun to drive.

Its 3239mm wheelbase is 25cm longer than the five-seater's, but overall the Buzz doesn't seem huge in this company, at 4962mm long. There's a decent level of standard equipment, and a lot more available via the options list, but the main joy of the electric-only Buzz interior is its versatility. The second row slides, reclines and folds flat. The third row is removable, giving an impressively large boot space (and it's not bad with the third row in place). Everyone gets a good view and a good amount of space for their head, arms, knees and feet. And those big sliding side doors are neighbour-friendly and fun. (I know, I know: if I drove a van every day, I wouldn't think there was anything fun about sliding doors.)

And the stowage box/armrest between the two front seats can be taken out of position – one of many examples of the thought given to the way the Buzz will be used when it's parked, not just when it's being driven. Then again, as Matt points out, VW's combustion-engined Multivan is actually better than the Buzz when it comes to interior versatility, with its three independent middle-row seats.

It's not fast, but you don't find yourself yearning for the extra potency of the GTX version. ATJ notes: 'Performance is more than adequate and it handles far better than it has any right to. The low-speed ride can be a little severe at times, but it feels more settled as a longer, heavier LWB than the SWB.' On a rapid charger you should expect it to take 30 minutes to get from five to 80 per cent full. Note that it's a much smaller battery than the Volvo and Kia, with a shorter range.

More than any of the other cars here, this is very focused on the passengers. They're comfortable, they get a get view out, they'll see people smiling at them, and they're well provided with USB slots, lights and vents. Disappointingly, though, the interior looks better than it feels. Ours is a £70k car, and yet some of the plastics feel ready to snap off in your hand.

In contrast to the flamboyant, statement-making VW, the Peugeot is visually anonymous. This must be deliberate, given how good-looking various recent Peugeots have been, and will suit a lot of people just fine. If you just want to get on with living your life, rather than having to explain your choice of vehicle in every supermarket car park, the Peugeot is your friend.

Even with some extras fitted, consisting of a £700 heat pump and £600 worth of driving assistance features, our GT-spec test car is pretty keenly priced in this context, at below £54k.

It comes with Peugeot's divisive i-Cockpit, here involving a 21-inch curved display, an oddly shaped steering wheel that blocks your ▶

Peugeot's seats the least fancy here, but perfectly comfortable

Built for a Martian voyage. Actually just outside Hull

IN CONTRAST TO THE STATEMENT-MAKING VW, THE PEUGEOT IS VISUALLY ANONYMOUS

view of the fancy digital instruments, and an embracing, cossetting vibe. You couldn't get further from a van if you wanted to.

Like all these vehicles, it involves certain compromises. Here, the emphasis is on being relatively car-like, both to drive and in terms of its interior ambience. In much the same way as its body feels right-sized for everyday driving conditions, so does its performance feel appropriate to the world of school runs, shopping and weekend family trips. On paper, its figures look rather modest, and it's certainly nothing like as rapid as the Kia. (A more powerful version is available, although it trims only 0.1sec off the 0-62mph time; its main aim is longer range.) That said, its efficiency figures during this test are the best of the quartet. On a rapid charger you're looking at 30 minutes to get from 20 to 80 per cent full.

This generation of 5008 is bigger than its predecessor, but not huge in this company; 4791mm long. It has conventional suspension, a conventional layout and a conventional feel, as befits a car designed to accommodate a plug-in hybrid powertrain or a mild hybrid for customers not ready to go electric. Alan says: 'The surprise of the test. It really didn't disgrace itself on the road in much more expensive company. It's also one of the comfier cars on test, if rather roly poly in the bends. A bit more pace would be nice, if not essential.'

The flip side of that car-like dynamism is its car-like interior space. It's the smallest car on the outside and, unmiraculously, the smallest on the inside too. When Jimmy was Little Jimmy, the third row would have been fine for him. Ditto slender Donny and Marie. But after they all graduated to stretch-comfort jump suits, row three would be a struggle. Your family may be happily nuclear, but if they're bringing any friends along for the ride they'd better not be too tall.

It's also quite gloomy. There's a £950 panoramic sunroof, but not on our car. There are also fancier seat options (although our manually adjusted seats are fine) but the option you might really want is not available: just a little more room for the third row. But then the price would go up, and so would the weight, and the charm of this oddly appealing French seven-seat EV would go down.

Having driven the Volvo up to Withernsea and been mildly impressed by its calm and comfort, that is put into context by my drive back south in the Peugeot. It'ss far from perfect, but almost as comfortable and relaxing, and a lot more fun – which, even when your focus is family-friendliness, must still count for something.

So, lots to argue about, but there's an emerging consensus among our testers that this is a fine line-up if you're in a position to choose an electric seven-seater in 2025. These are cars that overlap where it matters most, but which also offer significant differences to suit your preferences and requirements.

Some vehicle categories still seem to be problematic or unappealing to the makers of electric cars – where exactly are all the two-seat roadsters beyond the MG Cyberster, and why are there so few estate cars? But this impressive group of seven-seaters shows that tremendous progress is possible when the car makers put their minds to it.

A seven-seat EV is now a rational, versatile real-world choice. If only the prices would come down a bit – which they will, as less showy versions of the Volvo in particular become available, and as other manufacturers get involved, from the four corners of the Earth, trade wars permitting. ▶

Peugeot has bothered more than the rest with how it feels to drive

Would petrol versions be better? Probably not

FINAL RECKONING

MPVs IN DISGUISE

After a few miles driving any one of these cars it's easy to forget what labels they wear. Being electric isn't what defines them. Except on bladder-challenging long trips, battery range won't be an issue. In fact, being electric is a boon for family transport, even putting aside the absence of emissions, as the quietness inherent in ditching combustion power improves the ambience no end, keeping the volume levels low and tetchiness in check.

Nor are they defined by their body styles. Two are clearly SUVs, one is a retro minibus and the Peugeot is an indeterminate blob. But they're all essentially high-up cars, from the driving seat. And if you glance over your shoulder, they're MPVs.

This is not damning with faint praise. Those of us old enough to remember the millennium-straddling golden age of the MPV – the era of various Espaces, the Galaxy/Alhambra/Sharan triumvirate, the exceptional Ford S-Max – will recall fondly the way they tended to drive rather better than they needed to. V6 engines were not unknown. And those MPVs that took the needs of your passengers seriously – giving them a good view, decent room, proper control over their temperature and entertainment – seemed like a triumph for civilisation.

Much of that attention to the passenger is evident in this 2025 quartet, but there are also unmistakable signs of compromise. The Peugeot's third row is mostly for small kids. The Volvo's isn't great for a car of this size. And for all of them, you'll struggle if all seven occupants want to bring luggage too.

The Volvo isn't as special as we'd hoped, given our very positive experiences with the XC90, and the price seems like a mistake. It's also rather heartening, in a roundabout kind of way, to note that the most expensive car here is the one that we were all least impressed by. Yes, this is a high-spec version, but even in lower spec it's still a lot of cash. Yet it has many merits. And let's not lose sight of the fact that as recently as a couple of years ago the 'electric seven-seater' category mostly involved van-based cars, a couple of cramped Mercs and a weird Tesla. There's been immense progress since then.

As well as the Hyundai Ioniq 9 – which *CAR*'s Jake Groves has driven and enjoyed on two continents – there will be more electric seven-seaters along soon, including some keenly priced Chinese alternatives, unless geopolitical strife sends us all retreating behind the sofa, firing up an Osmonds playlist on Spotify, yearning for simpler, happier times. **car**

1st

KIA EV9

Tremendous all-rounder that's good to drive and good to be driven in

★★★★☆

= 2nd

PEUGEOT E-5008

An engaging drive, but the third row is small

★★★★☆

= 2nd

VW ID. BUZZ

If you like the style and are serious about seating seven, a winner

★★★★☆

4th

VOLVO EX90

Oddly lacking in sparkle and luxury, and bonkers costly

★★★☆☆

VOLVO EX90

▶ What's the line-up?

The EX90 range starts with the Single Motor RWD Plus version for £82,660, but our test car is the Twin Motor AWD in Ultra spec for £96,360. There's also a higher-power Performance version, for a smidge under six figures, that takes power up from 402 to 510bhp and trims a second off the 0-62mph time.

▶ Data

Price £96,360 (£96,360 as tested) **Powertrain** 107kWh battery, twin e-motors, all-wheel drive **Performance** 402bhp, 568lb ft, 5.9sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Weight** 2780kg **Efficiency** 3.0 miles per kWh (official), 2.9 miles per kWh (tested), 375-mile range (official), 310-mile range (tested) **Length/width/height** 5037/2113/1744mm **Boot capacity** 324-1316 litres plus 46-litre frunk

PEUGEOT E-5008

▶ What's the line-up?

The range kicks off with the Allure. The GT has a little more of everything, including adaptive cruise control with stop-go. There's a choice of battery sizes; ours is the smaller of the two, in GT trim. EV prices start at £48,660. There are also mild hybrid and plug-in versions.

▶ Data

Price £52,350 (£53,650 as tested) **Powertrain** 73kWh battery, e-motor, front-wheel drive **Performance** 235bhp, 254lb ft, 9.7sec 0-62mph, 106mph **Weight** 2218kg **Efficiency** 3.9 miles per kWh (official), 3.5 miles per kWh (tested), 310-mile range (official), 256-mile range (tested) **Length/width/height** 4791/2108/1694mm **Boot capacity** 348-2232 litres

KIA EV9

▶ What's the line-up?

The EV9 is available with single or twin motors and rear- or all-wheel drive, in Air, GT-Line or GT-Line S trim, with six or seven seats. Pricing starts from £65,035, but by the time you get to our GT-Line S AWD seven-seat test car, which is close to the top of the line-up, you're paying a further £11k.

▶ Data

Price £76,035 (£76,035 as tested) **Powertrain** 96kWh battery, twin e-motors, all-wheel drive **Performance** 378bhp, 516lb ft, 5.3sec 0-62mph, 124mph **Weight** 2648kg **Efficiency** 2.7 miles per kWh (official), 2.4 miles per kWh (tested), 313-mile range (official), 267-mile range (tested) **Length/width/height** 5015/2263/1780mm **Boot capacity** 333-2318 litres plus 52-litre frunk

VW ID. BUZZ

▶ What's the line-up?

The seven-seaters start at £59,645 for the Life version. There are also GTX and Style versions. The seven-seater has only one battery size but the GTX version has a higher power output. Our Style test car has extras including a retractable towbar and this eye-catching paint.

▶ Data

Price £64,345 (£71,615 as tested) **Powertrain** 86kWh battery, e-motor, rear-wheel drive **Performance** 282bhp, 413lb ft, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 99mph **Weight** 2795kg **Efficiency** 3.01 miles per kWh (official), 2.9 miles per kWh (tested), 286-mile range (official), 249-mile range (tested) **Length/width/height** 4962/2211/1937mm **Boot capacity** 306-2469 litres

Our cars

HELLO BMW M5 + OUR AUDI S3 IS TESTED BY *CAR* READERS + GOODBYE LAND ROVER DEFENDER

A bit more visual attitude than the A3, a bit less than the RS

Jordan Butters

AUDI S3 MONTH 6

Unhappy medium

Theory clashes with reality when two potential S3 owners sample our long-term test car. By **Curtis Moldrich**

The story so far

Time to find out how highly two of our readers rate the S3

+ Impressive performance, practicality and interior

- Still not the most engaging car to drive

Logbook

Price £47,490 (£51,135 as tested) **Performance** 1984cc turbocharged four-cylinder, 328bhp, 4.7sec 0-62mph, 155mph **Efficiency** 34.4mpg (official), 19.2mpg (tested), 188g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 31.4p per mile **Miles this month** 2629 **Total miles** 4949

I didn't have to look far for two candidates to drive my Audi S3. Nick Whalley has a car history longer than most. He currently runs a VW Golf GTI Performance Pack and has owned all sorts of tasty cars from a BMW 330i Touring to a Lotus Exige, and is now searching for an elusive balance of performance and practicality.

Mal, on the other hand, is a BMW man through and through – and a rear-wheel-drive one at that. 'I have an M135i now – the newer one – and in the past I've had two other M140is,' he tells me. 'And in between that a 3-series which I got rid of because it was super boring.' But he's also been curious about the Audi alternative.

Against all odds, the Peterborough weather has delivered, and conditions are perfect for a proper sampling of the S3. The plan is simple: into the city centre for urban driving, then off to faster roads to test the Audi's dynamics. Initial impressions are good: the S3 feels grippy and sure-footed around town, with a premium interior to match.

'My ideal car would be a sort of M3 Touring type affair,' Nick muses. His manual, front-wheel-drive Golf is a car he's always liked for its engagement, offering feedback in spades – but its middling brakes and limited traction have him eyeing up some of the VW Group's other hatches. He wants a car 'on its nose' and the GTI just won't oblige.

The S3 interior feels nice enough for Mal, who's impressed by Audi's fit and finish – though he's not been in the standard A3, which is priced from £30k and feels very similar to the much costlier S. Nick is equally happy and finds a comforting familiarity in the layout and configurability of the instruments and controls. He notes that with every generation it's getting harder to turn the bings and bongs off.

Although Mal is a serial BMW owner, he's not ruling anything out. 'I would look at brands other than BMW,' he says. 'I was thinking about possibly a Golf R, S3, RS3 or something like that.' Could this Audi be the car that finally breaks Munich's hold?

The RS3 begins at £59,900 compared to the S3's £47,490 starting price (£51,135 for our cars with extras), pushing it towards the top end of Mal's price range. Like Nick, Mal craves engagement and feel from his ▶

However hard he looks, Nick just can't find much to love

hot hatches – one of the reasons the all-wheel-drive M135i isn't quite cutting it: 'I really like it, but it's not as good as the rear-wheel-drive M140i, which was much more fun – it felt rawer.'

After some time with the car on a few of Cambridgeshire's more interesting roads, Nick's verdict is in – and it's damning with faint praise. 'I admire it, but I don't love it,' he reasons, throwing me back the keys. 'It's hard to find fault with it. It does everything you want, though not to the level that I might want in certain departments.'

Oh dear. These two are finding what plenty of others have found with the S3 and many other warm Audis over the years: it's a car that offers strong performance but without the driver involvement to match.

'My BMW's steering feels heavier and a bit more engaging,' Mal says after his driving stint with the S3. 'With the Audi you're quite conscious of a high level of assistance. It just feels like you're not really doing it.'

But despite its numb handling and baked-in inferiority to the RS3, the S3 leaves a positive impression.

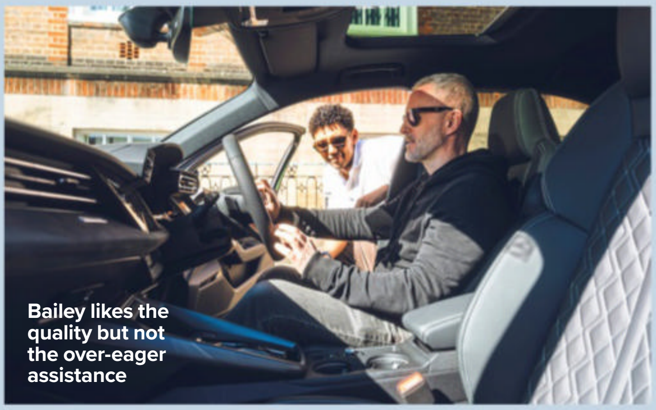
'I want a car that I can enjoy on my own but which also has the ability to transport my family in comfort and safety when I won't be doing anything so spirited,' reflects Nick. 'The RS3 would probably be too much for a family – whereas the S3 is a nice balance. It has a greater usable window.'

In fact, Nick reckons the S3's under-the-radar looks could do with being a little more restrained. While poking around the car, he points out its reworked diffuser and fake mesh, dismissing them as a little too 'try-hard' for his taste, and then there are all the S logos. When I show him a picture of the RS3 in Viper Green, he's even less enthused. 'I prefer the older version – and what *is* that rear wing,' he grumbles.

'But it is a good chunk quicker,' he adds, glancing at the 3.8sec 0-62mph time compared to my S3's still nippy 4.7sec effort. Nick also picks up on a subtle distinction: unlike the Golf R – which is an altogether different beast to his GTI – the RS3 is just a more performance-focused version of the S3. Nick's racing background doesn't dispose him well to a car that's destined to be a Perez to the RS3's Verstappen.

Both Nick and Mal are impressed by the S3's blend of performance, price and comfort. The Audi can't be hustled like a Toyota GR Yaris, and won't provide Honda Civic Type R levels of feedback, but when a car does this much this well, it's earned its place on the shortlist.

It's a car that offers strong performance but without the driver involvement to match



Bailey likes the quality but not the over-eager assistance

SKODA SUPERB
MONTH 2

Infotainment tech that's on your side

It says a lot about the state of modern car interiors that I am celebrating using physical switchgear. My Skoda Superb, like the current Kodiaq, has Skoda's new Smart Dials.

They're a trio of physical control wheels in the dashboard, and they can control more than three functions; the outer ones adjust temperature and seat heating/cooling, while the central one can be customised to allow you quick access to audio volume and fan speed, and if you have adaptive dampers you can change the drive mode.

I recall discussing Skoda's reluctance to put too many controls into the touchscreen with Karl Neuhold, head of design. 'I like the logic we have at Skoda and, with our interiors, they're not over-engineered,' he told me. Smart Dials are a result of that thinking.

Two months into life with a Superb, the novelty of Smart Dials has not worn off. They're simple and effective. Both my partner and I quickly tuned into how they work, turning on the heated seats in milliseconds and tweaking the volume with a flourish. They are a bit plasticky but, overall, so much better than many VW Group alternatives.

JAKE GROVES

The story so far

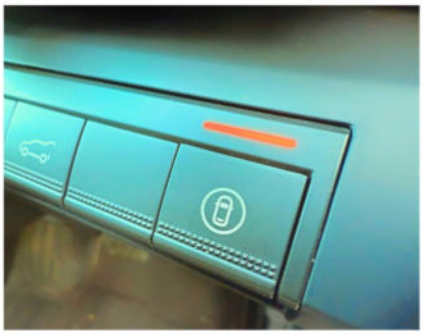
Skoda's 'Smart Dials' inside our Superb are extremely welcome

+ Physical meets digital in the best way possible – in the dash and in the Superb as a whole

- Those dials could feel a little less tinny

Logbook

Price £44,140 (£45,430 as tested) **Performance** 1968cc turbodiesel four-cylinder, 190bhp, 7.5sec 0-62mph, 148mph **Efficiency** 46.7mpg (official), 36.6mpg (tested) **Energy cost** 17.5p per mile **Miles this month** 482 **Total miles** 1568



RENAULT SCENIC
MONTH 2

Enjoy the silence

With just under 8000 miles covered since it was registered in June 2024 – 5000 of those racked up before landing on my driveway – the Scenic required a service. A call to Hendy in Portsmouth, our nearest Renault dealer, secured a booking later that week, priced at £199. I dropped off the car, and asked the service desk to look at the front tyre wear as a possible explanation for the previously noted modest traction levels, and to sort out the passenger-side wiper that was leaving a two-inch-wide arc of unswept glass.

All tyre tread levels were fine, I was told on collection later that afternoon, all checks and procedures came back with a green light, but they couldn't replicate the issues I was having with the wiper. Which was difficult to believe because a quick test on the drive home revealed the band of unwashed glass was still unwashed. I'll fit a set myself.

So-so service experience aside, the Renault continues to quietly impress. The car's tech works the way you want it to. For instance, two taps in succession instantly deactivates and mutes my choice of intrusive driver aids.

BEN WHITWORTH

The story so far

Renault's revival of the Scenic name – used to be an MPV, now an electric crossover

+ Helpful tech; useful battery range; stylish

- Stiff-jointed ride; surprisingly modest grip levels

Logbook

Price £45,495 (£46,745 as tested) **Performance** 87kWh battery, e-motor, 215bhp, 7.9sec 0-62mph, 105mph **Efficiency** 4.2 miles per kWh (official), 3.5 miles per kWh (tested) **Range** 369 miles (official), 322 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 3.5p per mile **Miles this month** 1611 **Total miles** 3198

VW ID. 7
MONTH 6

To wagon or not to wagon?

I normally favour estates over their saloon kin, finding the extra luggage space welcome. But our ID. 7, which looks like a saloon but is actually a hatchback, already has huge carrying capacity. The estate costs £790 more than the hatch, but will even that negligible outlay be worth it?

Legroom is unchanged, as is the length of the luggage space, front to back. The estate holds 605 litres versus the hatch's 532 litres.

I suspect my two-year-old golden retriever Flossie preferred the more upright Tourer as her mobile kennel, but for most day-to-day needs the hatch has done just fine, with its large, uncluttered loadbay and a decent cubby beneath for stowing charging cables.

Given the £270-a-month independent leasing deals available on the ID. 7 Tourer over two years, I'd be sorely tempted to go for the estate if this were my own money, but if you do end up with the ID. 7 saloon, you're hardly left shortchanged. Only one quirk that irks: both have the electric tailgate button positioned on the left side of the bootlid – a subtle inconvenience for most of the (right-handed) population.

TIM POLLARD

The story so far

Volkswagen's family EV launched as a hatch but now there's a sleek estate too

+ Estate is better looking and boasts an extra 73 litres of boot space

- Extra capacity isn't actually that useful

Logbook

Price £51,550 (£55,270 as tested) **Performance** 77kWh battery, e-motor, 282bhp, 6.5sec 0-62mph, 112mph **Efficiency** 4.7 miles per kWh (official), 3.7 miles (tested), 0g/km CO2 **Range** 393 miles (official), 321 miles (tested) **Energy cost** 7.3p per mile **Miles this month** 1623 **Total miles** 8120

Jordan butters

MERCEDES GLC
MONTH 3

Getting into the zone

Oxford's zero-emissions zone is 80 miles away, matching the plug-in Merc's claimed range. Game on. By **Ben Barry**

The story so far

Merc's mid-size SUV, here in unusual diesel PHEV form
+ Roomy and well equipped
- Real mpg is good, but official figures seem out of reach

Logbook

Price £61,110 (£61,825 as tested) **Performance** 31.2kWh battery, 1993cc turbodiesel four-cylinder plus e-motor, 328bhp, 553lb ft **Efficiency** 565.0mpg (official), 85.7mpg plus 3.5 miles per kWh (tested), 11g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 15.8p per mile **Miles this month** 695 **Total miles** 5270

Plug-in hybrids are the most use-case dependent of all powertrains. Keep plugging in and stay local and you'll never drain a tank of fuel – and might as well go full electric. But do longer runs and rarely charge and you'll get worse fuel economy than an equivalent petrol or diesel that doesn't carry heavy batteries.

The middle ground is the plug-in hybrid sweet spot, and in theory it's what I should experience on today's road trip in the diesel-electric GLC 300de.

The route takes me cross-country from the East Midlands to Oxford plus a visit to classic Mercedes specialist Edward Hall and a return stint that includes a short motorway leg. All in it's over 200 miles.

Why Oxford? Being almost exactly 80 miles from my front door, it's a near exact match for the 80 miles of electric range Mercedes claims from the GLC's 31.2kWh battery. I want to see how close we get. It's also home to a 'zero emissions' zone, first introduced in 2022. For now it lets EVs (and classics, hearses and military vehicles) in free and charges sub-75g/km cars like ours £2 to enter. That's half the charge of most modern petrols and diesels, and a big discount on the £10 charged to everything else. Come August, these prices double.

When I jump in the GLC at 6.30am, it's 0.5°C outside – cold enough to dent the EV range, so we're already unlikely to get close to 80 miles on e-motor alone. Sure enough, when I pause at Pitsford Reservoir, I've covered 33 miles at an average of 29mph with an indicated 13 miles of electric range remaining. On the plus side, it's been a relaxing trip cross-country, the Merc refined and comfortable all the way – mostly spritely enough too, even with only the 134bhp electric motor propelling 2310kg (though any need for urgent acceleration can be alarming, as the diesel takes so long to rouse). Combined, the diesel engine and electric motor can provide 328bhp and 553lb ft.

The 2.0-litre turbodiesel chimes in after 39 miles – just under 50 per cent of that claimed range. It's less refined than in EV mode but Mercedes has clearly worked hard to smooth the transition to the four-cylinder turbodiesel, which is well isolated and pretty hushed by the usual standards.

The GLC's ride is mixed. With coils on the front and air ▶

Hushed progress under the Bridge of Sighs thanks to the e-motor

ZEZ
100 yds
7am - 7pm

Great when they work, apparently

springs on the rear, it can feel a little pattery around town, and heavily cambered and/or crumblier roads can set it rocking about like a peg-leg pirate. Yet for the vast majority of our trip it's defined by a long-striding, comfort-focused gait.

I need to stop off in Northampton, and take the opportunity to use a GeniePoint charger in a nearby supermarket car park. Or try to. The screen is illegible in sunshine and a chap in a plug-in BMW 330e is already squinting at it, unable to make it work. I too struggle to read the screen and the contactless payment interface doesn't acknowledge my card. We both leave confused.

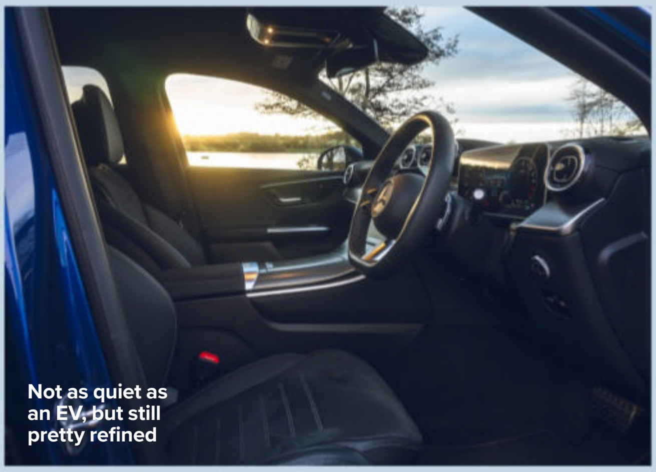
Charitably, the Oxford zero-emissions zone discount still stands, despite the Mercedes running on nothing but diesel at this point, but I try to get in the spirit and charge up as we edge towards the centre of the city. Handily the Merc's sat-nav can search for chargers by charging power, and lists which are unoccupied. Six 60kW charging sites with two chargers each are within 800 yards (meaning the battery could theoretically be replenished in 30 minutes), with everything else a far-too-tardy 5kW.

We head to The Blink charger on Keble Road, which won't let us pay without downloading the app, but a 'temporarily out of service' message means there's no point. To be fair there are five other chargers nearby that we could try, but we've got an appointment to make, a full tank of diesel and some sights to see.

For now Oxford's ZEZ covers just nine streets from 7am to 7pm, but the plan is to gradually pull up the drawbridge to more-polluting cars, with a decision on implementing a wider ZEZ expected in 2026.

After grabbing lunch, we head out of Oxford to Edward Hall Classic Mercedes a few miles east in the sticks. When we tell the eponymous Ed about our trip into the ZEZ, he notes the impact London's ULEZ has had on business. 'You'd get people who'd buy something for the weekend, typically a cool looking car that wasn't particularly expensive, and ULEZ destroyed that market,' he notes.

Still, business looks healthy. Hall has two large units, a handful of staff working on cars when we visit, and interesting classics all over the place – he's steam-cleaning a spares-or-repair 1972 280SE when we arrive and talks us round a gorgeous 1978 450 SLC in gold with green velour that's a highly tempting £30k.



Not as quiet as an EV, but still pretty refined

What to make of all this? It depends what you believe plug-in hybrids are actually for

Hall has been in business for eight years, a natural progression from the buying, selling and restoring he was already immersed in, and now does everything from basic servicing to full restorations. The stock list is always tasty. His interest is 'everything from 1960s Pagodas to W129 SLs from the 1990s' and points me to a W124 coupe that's both well used and well maintained in the workshop.

'I love this era of Mercedes, going into the 1980s Bruno Sacco period,' he enthuses. 'They're beautifully designed and made, very usable, engineered to be repaired, plus they ride and handle well. They're just as nice to drive and own today as they were 30 years ago.'

An hour later we're back on the road. We nip up the M40, before passing through Northampton again, after which I make my way north on a mix of A- and B-roads.

By the time I return home, the trip meter says I've covered 218 miles, averaged 26mph, the turbodiesel having returned 46.2mpg, with 20 per cent of the journey covered on electricity (it is all too easy to just look at the mpg and forget the additional cost of the electricity).

What to make of that? It depends what you believe plug-in hybrids are actually for. Officially they exist to reduce CO_2 emissions and improve fuel economy, but we all know people buy them to massively reduce their tax bill.

And on a relatively long trip like we've just done today, where charging infrastructure let us down, I'd bet a large chunk of people would be perfectly happy with that kind of fuel economy when they're saving so much tax – especially when they're still able to complete a journey without hanging about looking for a suitable charger or waiting to use it. I know I was.

True to Merc heritage? In some ways

Golden oldie, or just plain rusty?

MAZDA MX-30 MONTH 4

Straight answers

Head north and keep going towards the end of the A1 – a simple plan to find out what the Mazda's range-extender tech can really deliver. By **Mark Walton**

The story so far

We test our Mazda's claimed fuel range against the reality of a long journey north

+ There's no range anxiety in the range-extended MX-30

- There's not a lot of joy either

Logbook

Price £33,495 (£35,295 as tested) **Performance** 17.8kWh battery, e-motor plus 830cc rotary-engine petrol range extender, 168bhp, 9.1sec 0-62mph, 87mph **Efficiency** 37.2mpg (official), 31.2mpg (tested), 21g/km CO2 (WLTP weighted combined) **Range** 53 miles electric (official)/390 miles with range extender (claimed) **Energy cost** 19.6p per mile **Miles this month** 421 **Total miles** 7349

Weirdly, I've lived my whole life on the A1. Not as a truck driver – I mean I grew up on a farm a couple of miles from the motorway at Scotch Corner, then I lived in Edinburgh and Stamford, and for a long time I worked around Islington in London. As a Cockney gangster would say, the A1 is my manor.

Which is why I happen to know (pub-quiz fact!) the A1 is the longest numbered road in Britain, at 400 miles from London to Edinburgh. Fascinating, right? But that figure also happens to be the approximate range of the Mazda MX-30 R-EV, when fully charged and brimmed. So how about we put that to the test, by driving the full length of the A1?

(If you're looking for any more rhyme or reason for what follows, you're going to be disappointed.)

The A1 starts at Aldersgate near St Paul's, one of the original gateways into the Roman city of Londinium and the gate the Scottish king, James IV, used to enter London in 1603, to claim the English throne. We're doing his journey in reverse.

I've fully charged the Mazda and filled it with fuel, but already we're in trouble – the battery range is showing 45 miles, eight less than the claimed 53, and total range – using the range extender – is 338 miles, around 50 under Mazda's claimed 390 miles. I'm going to have to coast my way to Edinburgh.

As I've said before, the MX-30 is a perfectly good EV, it's smooth and quiet and responsive like all battery-powered cars; but it's hard to love the range extender. It may be practical, but it drones like a leaf blower on a Sunday morning. Thing is, the rotary engine doesn't just kick in when the battery drains out, it starts up any time you accelerate hard, to boost your power. So I trickle out of London and beyond the M25 as gently as I can, trying not to use any fuel. At this rate, James IV was probably quicker.

North of London the A1 roughly follows the route of the Great North Road, the medieval coaching road that highwayman Dick Turpin allegedly took on his epic, 15-hour ride to York. Just about every inn ▶

Simon Thompson

Definitely in the north. Just not as far north as we should have been

The modern multi-tasking journalist hard at work

I accelerate to 70mph, and the rotary engine is running non-stop to keep the battery topped up

north of Watford claims to have been 'the famous resting spot for Turpin and his horse Black Bess' – which is strange, because Turpin would never have got there that fast if he'd stopped for that many venti iced caramel macchiatos, plus the whole story is made up anyway. But the modern A1 bypasses all those traditional inns, so me and my faithful Mazda stop at an OK Diner instead.

Driving at 50mph is unbelievably boring so after a coffee and a bacon sandwich I accelerate to 70mph. By now the little rotary engine is running non-stop to keep the battery topped up, so I feel I've got nothing to lose. Without a plug-in charge at the start of your journey, the MX has been doing around 27mpg (a previous report explained why I haven't been charging it much); add in a full-battery boost and you can get much closer to the claimed 37mpg. Even so, my chances of reaching Edinburgh are remote already.

Of course, one of the things I can do to boost my range is to switch off the heating, always the biggest battery drain after the EV motors themselves. This is no great loss – I'd say heating is one of the weakest parts of the MX-30. The system often decides to randomly blow out freezing cold or clammy warm air, and the windscreen regularly mists up for no apparent reason. While you might 'set and forget' the temperature in other cars, I find I'm constantly fiddling with the Mazda's, trying to get comfortable. Turning it off is a relief from the hassle.

Still, by the time I drive across North Yorkshire and stop by the Scotch Corner Hotel – once a great Art Deco landmark, now a slightly neglected Holiday Inn – I know I'm never going to reach Edinburgh on a tank. I've done 237 miles so far, but my remaining range is under 90.

So I decide to symbolically end my trip under the Angel of The North, the famous 20-metre-high steel sculpture by Antony Gormley. Installed on a hill overlooking the A1 in 1998, it was inspired by the industry of Tyneside – Gormley described it as 'a ship's hull, turned inside out'.

After 278 miles, the MX-30 is an impressive piece of engineering, but hardly angelic. By the time I stop to fill up (with a few miles left on the range) it turns out we managed 33.6mpg. Not terrible – but as always I can't help feeling the R-EV's tech is over-egged. A straightforward 1.0-litre petrol hatchback could easily match its green credentials on any medium to long journey. The Mazda remains an enigma – though at least that burning 'How far can I get up the A1?' question has been answered.

Subtlety not a word you'd associate with the G90 M5

Hello

BMW M5 **MONTH 1**

Weight watcher

With its heft and its hybrid powertrain, the latest M5 has been divisive from day one. Will living with one help us understand it? By **Piers Ward**

The story so far

Adding plug-in hybrid hardware might help the environment, but the extra weight has plenty of downsides. Still, supercar performance for all the family…

+ Incredible pace and torque; good electric range and overall usability; decently roomy

- Overly firm rear suspension; software niggles; size

Logbook

Price £111,515 (£133,670 as tested) **Performance** 18.6kWh battery, 4395cc 32v twin-turbo V8 plus e-motor, 717bhp, 738lb ft **Efficiency** 148-176mpg (official), 29.1mpg and 2.7miles per kWh (tested), 37-39g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 14.6p per mile **Miles this month** 1562 **Total miles** 3496

Like Ricky Hatton's waistline, BMW M division's form has been up and down recently. There have been a lot of dodgy grilles and a few questionable cars, most prominently the first hybrid M car, the hefty XM SUV. But then again there have been high points, including the M3 Touring and M4 CS.

But all of that is nothing next to the eyebrow-raising announcement that the M5 was going to be a plug-in hybrid and would tip the scales at 2510kg. Maybe that's why the 2.7-tonne XM came first, to give a sense of perspective to the M5's weight.

There were some very heated opinions from people who hadn't driven the car. When it reached the real world, it met a more nuanced reception – it even beat the Audi RS6 in a *CAR* Giant Test last year. So it's the ideal candidate for a long-term test, where its strengths and weaknesses can come into clearer focus over the course of thousands of miles.

Early days, but I've struggled to really bond with it. This is not a car that instantly comes to you like a faithful puppy, all eager and dying to please.

For starters, the hybrid integration isn't as slick as the Bentley Continental GT's, with too many pauses in the power delivery. I tend to begin the day using only electric power – great for not annoying the neighbours – but when you pull away from cold there's an annoying pause in the power delivery as you hit about 20mph. It reminds me of the nodding-head gearchange in an early Smart Fortwo. You can mitigate this by making it start in Dynamic (engine and e-motor combined) rather than the default Hybrid, which will use the e-motor alone, but then you wake the street.

It's visually as well as aurally striking. Its tracks are wider than those of the regular 5-series (by 75mm at the front, 48mm at the rear), meaning more blistered arches, and the light-up grille is unavoidable at night. Our car's Santorini Blue paint is hardly subtle. Throw in all the M5 badges – there are even some stamped in the metal behind the C-pillar – and you can understand why you get noticed a lot in this car. An Audi S8 even tried to race me the other evening, which you certainly don't get in other 5-series.

Inflation has not been kind to the M5. The starting price is £111,515 and ours comes in at £133,670, thanks to options like the paint (£1095, although there are nine metallic paints at no cost) and the £500 alloys. The white/black leather is £500 and the carbonfibre interior trim is £400 – I'd ditch both, especially as my jeans are already turning the white leather a shade of blue. It also comes with a £350 'flexible charging cable', which gives you the option of plugging into a three-pin socket; the wallbox lead comes as standard.

Our car's big extra cost, though, is the £19,500 Ultimate pack, which includes ventilated front seats and roller blinds. It brings with it the M Driver's pack, which raises the car's top speed, and ceramic brakes with gold calipers. You can spec those separately for £8850, which is the way I'd go as there are too many other items of questionable value in the wider Ultimate pack.

At the moment, the PHEV M5 doesn't feel like the significant step on from the F90 M5 CS I'd hoped. Maybe a few thousand miles in this G90 will prove that view wrong.

Simon Thompson

LAND ROVER DEFENDER MONTH 4

Goodbye

Greatness runs through it

Overkill? Perhaps. Pricey? Yes. But this Defender is special. By **Ben Miller**

The story so far

The biggest Defender, used as daily transport, pitched against Toyota's resurgent Land Cruiser and parked in rivers

+ Special Forces style; syrupy power; gorgeous cabin

- Some aircraft carriers are easier to park – and less thirsty

Logbook

Price £118,235 (£126,310 as tested) **Performance** 4999cc supercharged V8, 493bhp, 5.7sec 0-62mph, 149mph **Efficiency** 19.7mpg (official), 17.7mpg (tested), 324g/km CO2 **Energy cost** 33.0p per mile **Miles this month** 1276 **Total miles** 3450

Context is everything, and a Defender 130 with a supercharged V8 engine in the UK in 2025 should feel like a Moby Dick-sized whale out of water.

There were several fraught moments over the last four months in which I'd have happily swapped the Defender for something smaller, lighter, more efficient and possibly electric. It's priced at three times the average national salary, quite capable of dropping under 18mpg in normal use and so tall, wide and long that city centres are entered with teeth gritted and knuckles clenched; height and width restrictions are the stuff of nightmares; height-adjustable air suspension helps, but rear-wheel steering would be transformative.

And yet… Truth is, no test car my family and I have had the pleasure of living with has been talked about and adored to anything like the same degree, both during and after its time with us. Known affectionately as the apocalypse mobile (blame *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* et al), the 130's timing no doubt helped. Its heavyweight, all-wheel-drive and generously heated sanctuary hits different when the wind's horizontal and heavily frosted with February flurries. For a few very happy months the 130 wrapped its big arms around us and swaddled us in so much space, pace and grace it felt more like a land-locked Learjet than a Land Rover; effortless, luxurious, uplifting.

Passengers, particularly those who won the fight for the second-row captain's seats, unfailingly adored this Defender. With more second-row leg-

If the car looks bored it's because there's no jeopardy

room than a non-EWB Bentayga (and a creamier ride), these individual armchairs rival the back of an i7, Range Rover or S-Class for the title of best seats in the house. Plus there's another, barely any less decadent row behind that. Just don't expect much of a boot. Three spacious rows *and* a big boot might be too much to ask, granted, but driving something this large yet with such a vestigial cargo capacity never stops feeling weird, just as the side-hinged boot door never stops feeling clumsy.

I mostly drove the Defender 130, rather than sprawling in its lounge-like chill-out zones, and I loved every moment. For all its night-and-day progress over the previous vehicle to wear the badge, this is a Defender you drive in the same unhurried way in which you drove the old one, albeit for entirely different reasons. In the ladder-framed days you had no choice. The 130 V8, on the other hand, has adaptive dampers with a roll-battling Dynamic mode, beautiful Brembo brakes with one of the nicest pedals in any car, and dazzling acceleration on tap. But this is not a physics-defying SUV in the same vein as the Cayenne, Urus or Purosangue. The steering's lazy. Corner fast and there's roll. So instead, you cruise, weightless and relaxed in the peace and quiet that comes with spending time in a car this capable and this comfortable. The views are commanding, the seats exquisite and the combined effect of all of these things almost somnambulant; the whole almost meditative in its serenity – and with the distant murmur of a V8 instead of whale song.

The V8 does play a part in this luxury. As I've said, this is not a car that encourages silliness. And watching the vast tank (routinely a £100 fill) being emptied isn't at all relaxing. But it's so smooth, so charismatic and so effortless when you do need to get a move on (joining a motorway, for example, or to overtake) that it does bring magic to the mix, even if a D350 makes an awful lot more sense 99.9 per cent of the time.

It's almost meditative, with the murmur of a V8 instead of the more traditional whale song

Reliability, admittedly only over the course of a few months and 3000-ish miles, has been faultless, as most of our more recent Land Rovers have been. Only a Velar PHEV, which randomly drained its 12-volt battery one night, blotted this otherwise clean copybook.

Regrets? That I wasn't able to summon the funds to keep the 130, and that we didn't go far enough in it – and by far enough I mean Morocco, the Pyrenees or Skye, perhaps.

The Defender was extraordinarily good at everything we asked of it, from dead-of-night airport runs to family days out. But beyond a few trails in the Peak District and a local ford, I didn't really test this Land Rover's ability to rove wild land. Which is a shame, because – and I don't think is just the marketing talking – this is a car to get you thinking about maps, about distant lands and about disappearing. The Defender 130 fills your head with dreams of sleeping under the stars, of climbing mountains and of cruising the Sahara for killer Instagram content. And I'm insanely envious of anyone out there making it happen.

Count the cost

Cost new £126,310 **Private sale** £90,155 **Part exchange** £85,920 **Cost per mile** 33p **Cost per mile including depreciation** £10.81

You'll struggle to find a more relaxing drive

Olgun Kordal

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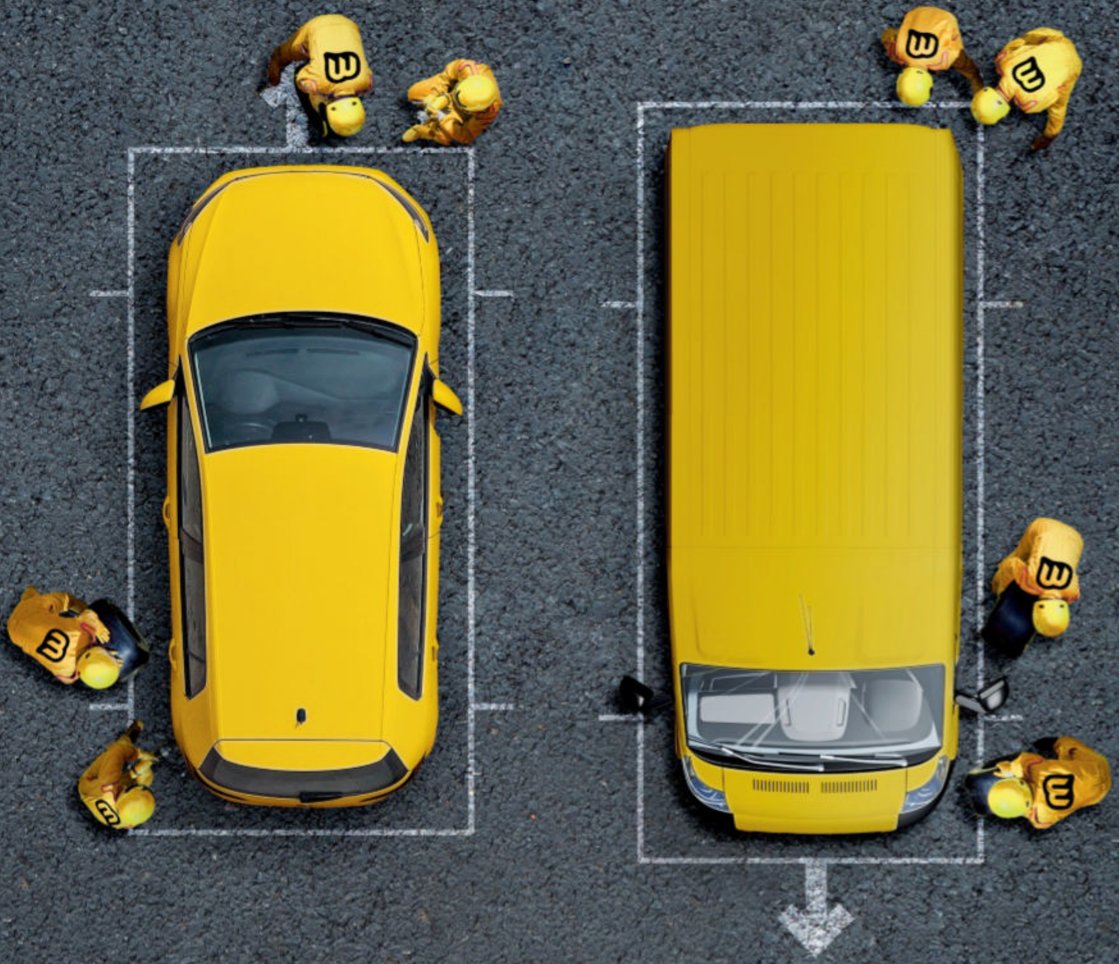

GBU

HOW DOES GBU WORK?
Our road testers rank the best cars currently available in 12 categories, and highlight the ones to buy

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly: The Top 5s

TOP 5 HOT HATCHES

GIANT TEST WINNER

Civic is fab in regular and Type R forms

1

HONDA CIVIC TYPE R

THE GOOD: Feel, feedback, focus: a phenomenal full-sized hot hatch

THE BAD: Now £51,905 for a front-drive hatchback with barely any more power than before

THE UGLY: Probably the last of its kind; good job it's one of the best

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one Type R; £459 a month on a three-year PCP with an £11.7k deposit

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

TOYOTA GR YARIS

THE GOOD: A modern-day rally homologation special that's thrilling to drive

THE BAD: Road noise like a death-metal gig; joke rear seats

THE UGLY: Long waiting list, even with some versions now over £60k, although it starts at £46,045

THE ONE TO BUY: Now has optional auto but go for the manual

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

VW GOLF R

THE GOOD: Superb Mk8.5 update makes this a seriously good and usefully quick all-rounder

THE BAD: Pity the Mk8 wasn't that already

THE UGLY: Still not quite there with the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: Estate is about £1.5k more than the hatch and more practical but not so sharp

GIANT TEST WINNER

4

AUDI RS3

THE GOOD: Want a five-cylinder hot hatch? Your option is RS3, with five or four doors

THE BAD: Now £60k; small boot for both

THE UGLY: RS is still better, but S3 does a lot for less money and is impressive in its own right

THE ONE TO BUY: £60,105 for the hatch; an extra grand for the saloon

5

VW GOLF GTI CLUBSPORT

THE GOOD: Rare mix of supreme comfort, hatchback versatility and cornering bite

THE BAD: The stats don't really shine in a 2025 context

THE UGLY: Mk8.5 a definite improvement, but interface still offers plenty to gripe about

THE ONE TO BUY: £42,155 for a very good Golf is pretty decent value

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TOP 5 SPORTS CARS

Hybrid GTS a masterclass in technological evolution

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

PORSCHE 911

THE GOOD: Exquisite blend of power, accuracy, excitement, style and usability, and new GTS integrates hybrid beautifully

THE BAD: You have to look down to #3 in this category to see the affordable performance Porsche; the most basic 911 is now priced in six figures in the UK, at £103,700

THE UGLY: It keeps getting bigger and heavier

THE ONE TO BUY: That basic Carrera is ace, and it's hard to imagine you'll regret it for a minute. But if you want more power and more trickery then Porsche has plenty of ways to take more of your money

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

ARIEL ATOM

THE GOOD: A beautiful object as well as a thrilling drive; think of it as a modernised Lotus Seven crossed with a high-end sportsbike

THE BAD: You'll need bike-style wet-weather gear if it's raining. And at least £40k – this is an expensive toy, if a captivating one

THE UGLY: The 4R is even more bonkers

THE ONE TO BUY: Do you really need the 350bhp optional power upgrade?

GIANT TEST WINNER

3

PORSCHE 718 CAYMAN/BOXSTER

THE GOOD: Sublime handling; surprising practicality

THE BAD: Less characterful than an Alpine; a boringly obvious choice (but not one bit boring to drive)

THE UGLY: Flat-four versions sound like a VW Beetle in a duet with Eeyore

THE ONE TO BUY: GT4 RS the most thrilling, Spyder is ace, but flat-six GTS 4.0 is a cut-price GT4 at £75,300

4

LOTUS EMIRA

THE GOOD: The first new combustion Lotus in years is fantastically well resolved. Usable, desirable and thrilling

THE BAD: Harder work to live with than a Cayman

THE UGLY: The last petrol Lotus, at least for now – just as the firm gets the bucks to build on its brilliance

THE ONE TO BUY: Recently revised line-up now consists of Turbo SE (AMG four-cylinder) and Toyota-engined V6

5

ALPINE A110

THE GOOD: The perfectly formed antidote to a world of excess; a modern classic in every sense of the term

THE BAD: Two boots, neither big, and not much oddment storage inside

THE UGLY: 'R' is 34kg lighter – some effort – but also more than £90k. Too much

THE ONE TO BUY: A110 S adds handling poise for £68,170 but £55,160 base A110 is all you need; enjoy it before it goes electric

TOP 5 GRAND TOURERS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

FERRARI ROMA

THE GOOD: Style, speed and sensuous lines; classic ideas adapted for 2025

THE BAD: If only the roads had classic emptiness

THE UGLY: Baffling steering-wheel touchpads; strangled exhaust note

THE ONE TO BUY: The cabrio. Arguably even more beautiful to look at from outside

BENTLEY CONTINENTAL GT

THE GOOD: Luxury, power, agility and a great-looking body

THE BAD: Nope, it's really sorted

THE UGLY: Just because it's always been heavy and thirsty won't stop us complaining that it's heavy and thirsty

THE ONE TO BUY: Plug-in hybrid range-topper is the most powerful Bentley ever, and so much more besides

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

PORSCHE 911 TURBO

THE GOOD: Hypercar-bothering pace, any road, any weather

THE BAD: Only fun when you're really going for it

THE UGLY: Turbo has never been good for depreciation; even less so recently

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry car plenty fast enough but Turbo S outsells it; hybrid update is expected later this year

PORSCHE TAYCAN CROSS TURISMO

THE GOOD: Raised ride height absolutely monsters lumpy UK roads

THE BAD: Not actually that practical

THE UGLY: Audi's e-Tron GT gets the nicer cockpit

THE ONE TO BUY: Revised version has arrived, along with revised prices: 4S Cross Turismo is now £99,200, and range hits £165k

ASTON MARTIN DB12

THE GOOD: Effortlessly beautiful DB11 replacement now has the traction to make the most of the rampant turbo V8's stomp. Excellent interior

THE BAD: Choosing between this and the Vanquish

THE UGLY: Aston simply doesn't do ugly

THE ONE TO BUY: Coupe is £185k; Volante the stunner

TOP 5 COUPES AND CABRIOS

BMW M2

THE GOOD: The longitudinal-engined two-door BMW coupe lives

THE BAD: Bigger and heavier than we'd like but outrageous fun

THE UGLY: You need £67k to get involved; steering can feel a shade rubbery

THE ONE TO BUY: Manual or auto transmission options – get the knob. We'd go M carbon seats, too

MASERATI MC20

THE GOOD: A no-excuses excellent Maserati. Handling and ride to match the looks; a GT as well as a sports car

THE BAD: Throttle could be sharper in normal mode

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you did mean to buy the Maser and not the 296

THE ONE TO BUY: The droptop Cielo. All the coupe's go with added style

MERCEDES-AMG SL

THE GOOD: Latest SL was developed by AMG but it's still a cruiser, and all the better for it

THE BAD: Engines are still better than the ride and handling

THE UGLY: Cabin designed by touchpad scattergun

THE ONE TO BUY: The £153k, 469bhp SL55; also look at the coupe cousin, the AMG GT

MAZDA MX-5

THE GOOD: Closest thing to a modern-day Lotus Elan; genius folds-flat-in-seconds roof

THE BAD: Lashings of bodyroll; the 1.5 can't climb hills

THE UGLY: If you're over 6ft tall you might not fit, especially in the metal-roofed RF

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 starts at £28k, 2.0 in Homura spec brings LSD for £35,515

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

THE GOOD: Fast and comfortable, and utterly gorgeous

THE BAD: Gets very thirsty without too much provocation

THE UGLY: DB12 and Vantage are also very good

THE ONE TO BUY: £333,000 will get you a very fine long, low, two-seat sports car/GT/near-supercar coupe

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUPERCARS

FERRARI 296 GTB

THE GOOD: Timeless styling and a driving experience as good as any of Maranello's finest

THE BAD: You need reflexes like a fighter pilot to drive it as fast as it can go

THE UGLY: Touch-sensitive steering-wheel pads make the interface borderline unusable

THE ONE TO BUY: Fiorano pack is £25k+ overkill. GTS adds sunshine

PORSCHE 911 GT3 RS

THE GOOD: Spine-tingling sound; 9000rpm redline; total immersion

THE BAD: Nothing to see here

THE UGLY: Getting on the waiting list is like winning both *The X Factor* and *The Apprentice*

THE ONE TO BUY: RS is somehow more focused than the GT3 but more road-compliant at the same time. How do they do it?

LAMBORGHINI REVUELTO

THE GOOD: The monstrous, naturally-aspirated V12 lives on – now e-boosted and wrapped in such a hard-to-crash package insurance should be a tenner. Vastly improved cabin, too

THE BAD: Price has skyrocketed

THE UGLY: EV-only range is six miles

THE ONE TO BUY: There is only one for now

MCLAREN 750S

THE GOOD: Lighter, more powerful, better: evolution of 720S is another corker from Woking

THE BAD: 30 per cent new but you'd struggle to tell

THE UGLY: Convincing your mates you actually bought the new car

THE ONE TO BUY: Stick to the comfort-spec seats and avoid the harnesses on the top 'super carbon' ones

CHEVROLET CORVETTE Z06

THE GOOD: A beautifully balanced performance package that can stand tall among the supercar aristocracy

THE BAD: Interior quality and kit not quite there

THE UGLY: Will future electrification kill the thrill?

THE ONE TO BUY: Add the Z07 pack for upgraded aero, suspension, brakes and wheels; expect to pay £140k

TOP 5 PLUG-IN HYBRIDS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW X5 50E

THE GOOD: Massive 67-mile official e-range; horizon-eating performance

THE BAD: Hybrid hardware cuts into boot space to the tune of 150 litres; no seven-seat option

THE UGLY: Not much now that the facelifted 50e model with more e-range and power is here

THE ONE TO BUY: This one, for £82k; it will serve you well

FORD KUGA

THE GOOD: Facelift has brought better efficiency, and it still drives very well

THE BAD: Electric-only range isn't great, although fuel consumption's good

THE UGLY: Not so much ugly as dowdy, particularly the interior – not a patch on the electric Explorer

THE ONE TO BUY: PHEV in ST-Line X trim can be had for £42,565

PORSCHE CAYENNE

THE GOOD: Handling; driver focus; choice of body styles; 0-62mph in 5.0sec

THE BAD: Bigger battery for facelift model but still can't match the X5

THE UGLY: The front passenger touchscreen: £1000 and not needed

THE ONE TO BUY: If you value the U in SUV, avoid the coupe – even if it is a great steer

VOLKSWAGEN TIGUAN

THE GOOD: Mk3 is bigger than ever but still a neat all-round package. Choice of 201 and 268bhp PHEVs, both with 62-mile e-range

THE BAD: Room for improvement with the infotainment

THE UGLY: People are buying Tiguans instead of Golfs, in huge numbers

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for either of the eHybrids in good-value Match trim

BMW 330E

THE GOOD: Goes sub-six to 62mph and up to 41 electric miles on a charge

THE BAD: Engine is slightly coarse; plain 330i is less heavy, more fun

THE UGLY: Hybrid kit eats into boot space so regular 3s are roomier

THE ONE TO BUY: Choice of saloon or estate. Handsome, vaguely affordable 330e Sport Touring is £48,895

TOP 5 ELECTRIC CARS

GIANT TEST WINNER

Watch out, Renault 5 – the 4 is about to hit the market

1

RENAULT 5 E-TECH

THE GOOD: The way it looks, the way it drives, the keen pricing – but it's also refreshingly practical, with five doors, a usable rear bench, and good efficiency, too

THE BAD: Fiddly gear selector stalk; no frunk

THE UGLY: What ugly? Look at it

THE ONE TO BUY: Entry point is £22,995 but we'd splash a few more grand on mid-spec Techno, which gets the '5' charging indicator on the bonnet and other desirable bits of kit, plus the option of the bigger battery, 52 rather than 40kWh

2

GIANT TEST WINNER

HYUNDAI IONIQ 5 N

THE GOOD: Electric and exciting – synthetic drive modes and gearchange are game changers

THE BAD: Breadth of configurability takes getting used to. Ignore that it's software-driven – it feels real

THE UGLY: Interior quality below par for a £65k car

THE ONE TO BUY: Just one model; paint and a sunroof the only options – all the drive modes are included

3

PORSCHE TAYCAN

THE GOOD: Totally overhauled but still fast, responsive and fluid; now more efficient

THE BAD: Info screen in front of the passenger is faintly ridiculous

THE UGLY: Prices are all up, and be aware of poor demand for used Taycans

THE ONE TO BUY: Priced from £88,200 for the rear-drive basic Taycan; you can pay a lot more and get a bit more performance

4

KIA EV3

THE GOOD: Roomy and clever interior; great value for such long range; funky looks – it's a shrunken EV9 or EV6

THE BAD: Air trim feels cheap inside, but only when compared to bigger Kia EVs

THE UGLY: That weird climate-control screen

THE ONE TO BUY: The 270-mile-range car is brilliant value but most will want the longer-range option. GT-Line is our pick for value-to-comfort goodness

5

RENAULT SCENIC

THE GOOD: Good value; long range; pleasant to drive; looks smart inside and out

THE BAD: Sometimes lumpy ride; poor rear visibility; rear seats don't slide or do other family-friendly tricks

THE UGLY: The boot is very deep, but not actually that big, and you have to pay extra for a variable floor

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the big battery in Techno trim; your family will thank you

PCM (per calendar month) figures are typical prices for PCP (personal contract purchase) deals available at the time of writing. For guidance only

TOP 5 SUVS/CROSSOVERS

110 body plenty big enough for just about anything

GIANT TEST WINNER

1

LAND ROVER DEFENDER

THE GOOD: Reboot brings untold dynamic improvements wherever you drive

THE BAD: Second-row access is a pain in the 90; expensive; 130 in particular is very big, so parking can be tricky

THE UGLY: Very nice inside, so you're wary of getting it muddy

THE ONE TO BUY: Range spans 90, 110 and 130 bodies, with significantly different dimensions but remarkably similar character and the genuine off-road ability that Land Rover always delivers so convincingly. Heart says Octa or petrol V8 90, head/wallet say diesel-six D250 110

GIANT TEST WINNER

2

PORSCHE MACAN

THE GOOD: The new one is electric – and as impressive as the outgoing combustion version

THE BAD: As family transport it has flaws, especially boot space

THE UGLY: Don't want EV? You'll need to be quick (or wait for the rumoured return of engines)

THE ONE TO BUY: EV starts at £68,500 and rises to £96,900 for the Turbo; £71,200 4 offers all you could sensibly want

3

ASTON MARTIN DBX 707

THE GOOD: Now with a much improved interior, the DBX keeps the glorious noise, masterful balance, rear-axle bias and surprising practicality

THE BAD: High fuel consumption and emissions from the twin-turbo V8

THE UGLY: There's no longer a non-707 version, so you need to pay top dollar

THE ONE TO BUY: The 707 will cost you around £210k

4

MERCEDES G-CLASS

THE GOOD: Rejigged range spans diesel, petrol, AMG and EV, and they're all good: agile off-road, smooth and comfy on-road

THE BAD: It's all a bit fancy; how do you feel about muddy wellies?

THE UGLY: Merc's premium mission means it's a posh version or nothing

THE ONE TO BUY: Electric is astonishingly good, but expensive at £154,870 (although the AMG's more)

5

INEOS QUARTERMASTER

THE GOOD: Pick-up version of the Grenadier has a long wheelbase that if anything improves the handling

THE BAD: Not very roomy for passengers

THE UGLY: Isuzus are much cheaper, if far less cool

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £66k, but a Trialmaster edition at £74k brings together a practical and good-looking set of extras

TOP 5 LUXURY CARS

GIANT TEST WIN
1

RANGE ROVER

THE GOOD: Masterful and hugely desirable reinvention of an icon. An EV version is almost here

THE BAD: Reliability remains a worry. EV likely to be extremely heavy

THE UGLY: The D350 mild-hybrid straight-six diesel is sublime. Can you live with the guilt?

THE ONE TO BUY: The above (from £108,555), though the V8 is fun

ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM

THE GOOD: Money-no-object pinnacle of serenity and craftsmanship

THE BAD: Is this really you? And is this really appropriate in 2025?

THE UGLY: It's all a bit oligarchy

THE ONE TO BUY: It's 'standard' or long-wheelbase, from £380k. All cars are built to order so many owners pay much more

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BENTLEY FLYING SPUR

THE GOOD: Now a hybrid V8, the Spur has great performance and poise plus decent e-range

THE BAD: Other VW Group cars get even smarter chassis tech

THE UGLY: Lots of emphasis on expensive options, so brace your credit card

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the Speed, from £226,500

MERCEDES S-CLASS

THE GOOD: Tech-fest with timeless waftability. Few cars are more calming

THE BAD: Surprisingly unrefined petrol six; doesn't ride as well as it should

THE UGLY: Trying not to crash while using the Hyperscreen

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid 580e works best: £119,370 in entry AMG Line Premium trim

ROLLS-ROYCE SPECTRE

THE GOOD: A joy to drive, and exquisitely built

THE BAD: Efficiency not great

THE UGLY: Fabulous detailing and engineering will benefit so few

THE ONE TO BUY: New Black Badge version keeps what's good about the regular Spectre but adds an extra level of dynamism. Also, of course, a bit more expense

TOP 5 FAMILY CARS

BIG SELLER
1

BMW 3-SERIES

THE GOOD: On-the-deck driving position; dreamy handling balance; slick interior; 50 years on, a brilliant car to drive and live with

THE BAD: Knowing you've made the obvious choice

THE UGLY: You'll need an M340i or M340d for six cylinders

THE ONE TO BUY: 330e if you want a hybrid; 320i if you're on a budget

GIANT TEST WINNER
2

BMW 5-SERIES

THE GOOD: Much has changed; still great. Handling defines the class

THE BAD: It's now a very hefty car

THE UGLY: Is nowhere safe? Even the tradition-embracing 5-series gets a full EV option in the form of the i5

THE ONE TO BUY: Prices start at £52,175 for the 520i but can easily exceed £80k (and the M5's well into six figures)

DACIA JOGGER

THE GOOD: Seven seats; massive boot with the rear row removed; prices start at £18,970

THE BAD: Sandero base means it's a bit narrow; spartan

THE UGLY: Low Euro NCAP score, although it's pretty safe in a crash

THE ONE TO BUY: Hybrid usefully punchier than petrol, but much clunkier. PCP a steal at £187 a month

VOLKSWAGEN ID. 7

THE GOOD: The most coherent ID to date now in a choice of hatch and estate. Not posh, but highly agreeable

THE BAD: Frumpy styling and that still sub-par interface

THE UGLY: So few electric estates to choose from

THE ONE TO BUY: Pro Match with 77kWh battery does the job just fine, priced from £51,005 for the hatch

AUDI A6 E-TRON

THE GOOD: Electric saloon and estate is refined, quick and pretty sharp, with a typically smart cabin and decent range

THE BAD: Rear passenger room isn't great

THE UGLY: Audi's constant model name changes are just confusing

THE ONE TO BUY: Go for the £70,715 rear-wheel-drive A6 e-Tron Sport Performance

TOP 5 FAMILY HATCHES

BMW 1-SERIES

THE GOOD: Premium and practical, and a lot more normal than the original 1-series

THE BAD: Actually a bit too normal for some tastes

THE UGLY: Facelift has dialled down the ugly, thankfully

THE ONE TO BUY: £31,875 mild-hybrid front-drive 120 or £43,740 all-wheel-drive 296bhp M135; both good, if a bit much for some tastes

PEUGEOT 208

THE GOOD: Style; big-car character; knockout interior; EV version available

THE BAD: So-so handling; a squash for adult rear-seat passengers

THE UGLY: Dumping the wheel in your lap like a TV dinner to see the dials clearly

THE ONE TO BUY: From £24,155, but £26,305 GT is worth saving up for. Bright colour is best

GIANT TEST WIN
3

MINI COUNTRYMAN

THE GOOD: Wonderful interior and all-round feelgood factor from the big five-door

THE BAD: You need to be in the mood for the built-in zaniness

THE UGLY: Options can send the price into the stratosphere

THE ONE TO BUY: Your basic Countryman C Classic is just fine at a sniff over £29,100

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF

THE GOOD: Brain-out default choice still a solid all-rounder; ride, visibility, roominess

THE BAD: Seat Leon a very similar package for a lower price

THE UGLY: Revised Mk8.5 version just a bit better, especially the infotainment

THE ONE TO BUY: 1.5 TSI 150 Match at £29,325; roomy estate is also great value

FIAT GRANDE PANDA

THE GOOD: Remarkably roomy, keenly priced, charming and useful

THE BAD: Not the sharpest or quickest

THE UGLY: Everything looks a little plain next to a Renault 5

THE ONE TO BUY: £21k entry point or £24k for the better-kitted posh version; EV for now, hybrid will follow

TOP 5 SPORTS SALOONS

GIANT TEST WINNER
1

BMW M3

THE GOOD: Mighty straight-six; front axle's never-give-up attitude; dreamy chassis balance

THE BAD: No manual; nearly 911 money now

THE UGLY: M3 Touring £89,435; saloon is £87,205– both quite steep

THE ONE TO BUY: The CS, if you were lucky enough to bag one of the 100 brought here. Used Touring is a good secondhand buy

MERCEDES-AMG S63

THE GOOD: V8 plus e-motor shows AMG can do a great performance hybrid, and in the most unlikely of places: a huge luxury saloon

THE BAD: Boot size suffers, and ride quality isn't perfect

THE UGLY: It's a pity this approach wasn't applied to the latest C63

THE ONE TO BUY: Two versions, both £193,525, one with more black trim

GIANT TEST WINNER
3

BMW M5

THE GOOD: Very rapid, ridiculously agile and refreshingly low on emissions; a clever reboot in PHEV form

THE BAD: Lots of modes, and an odd amount of wind noise; more divisive than previous M5s

THE UGLY: Heavy and expensive, so it's not *that* clever

THE ONE TO BUY: £113,405 for the Touring; £2k less for the saloon

ALFA GIULIA QUADRIFOGLIO

THE GOOD: Charisma in spades, fantastic agility and almost as good as an M3 to drive

THE BAD: Emphasis on *almost* as good as an M3 to drive

THE UGLY: Flaky interior quality; infotainment still lags behind the best

THE ONE TO BUY: There's just the one, wonderful, model from £86,885

PORSCHE PANAMERA

THE GOOD: New version builds on success of the very fine model it replaces

THE BAD: Barely a saloon – four-up is okay, but forget five

THE UGLY: Estate version is no longer available, even though it was the best looker

THE ONE TO BUY: £89,400 gets you in; Turbo E-Hybrid at £151,500 now tops the range

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NEW TAVASCAN
100% ELECTRIC
CUPRA
CUP 12A

For the daring few. The new CUPRA Tavascan is here to redefine performance with its bold, unconventional design and state-of-the-art technology. Our first all-electric SUV coupé, crafted for those who defy the ordinary.

Maximum range on a full charge for a CUPRA Tavascan is 298.9 - 353.6 miles (official test WLTP figures) depending on the trim. Official fuel consumption for the Tavascan mpg (litres/100km) combined: N/A. Combined CO_2 emissions: 0g/km. Test data obtained under standardised conditions after the battery had been fully charged (to 100%). The Tavascan is a battery electric vehicle requiring mains electricity for charging. Figures shown are for comparability purposes and may vary by trim. Only compare fuel consumption, CO_2 and electric range figures with other vehicles tested to the same technical procedures. These figures may not reflect real life driving results, which will depend upon a number of factors including the starting charge of the battery, accessories fitted (post-registration), variations in weather, driving styles, route conditions, speed, vehicle and battery age and vehicle load. Zero emissions while driving. Data correct at December 2024.